The New Criterion

June 1991

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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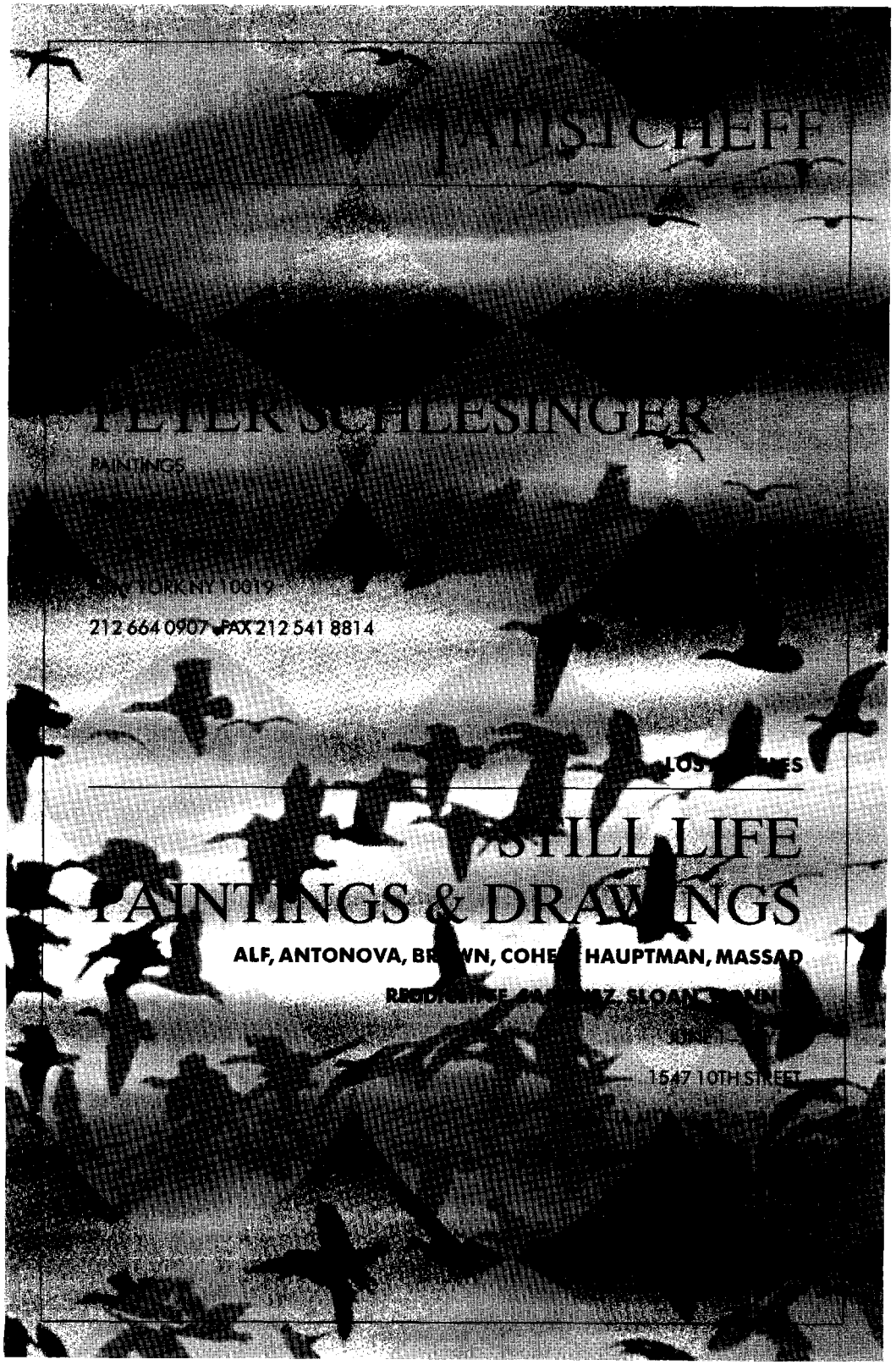

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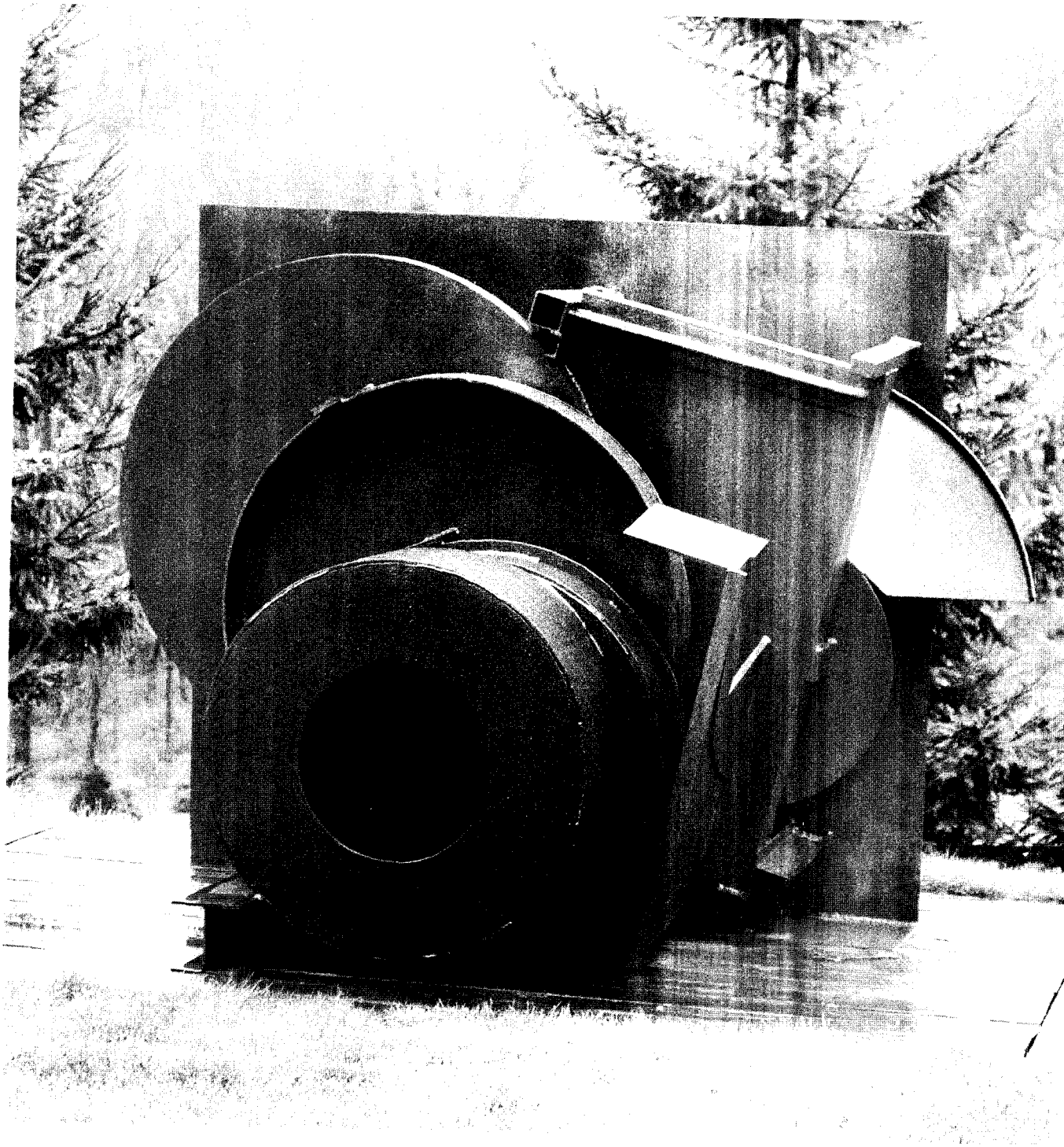

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The New Criterion *June 1991*

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To mark
the beginning of its tenth year

The New Criterion

will publish a special
anniversary issue in September 1991

To be included in this issue:

Notes & Comments: looking back on a decade

Has success spoiled the art museum? *by Hilton Kramer* □ The culture of classical music today *by Samuel Lipman* □ Literary life in the 1990s *by Bruce Bawer* □ The legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche *by Roger Kimball* □ Ballet after Balanchine *by Moira Hodgson* □ The direction of poetry *by Robert Richman* □ Russian literature today *by Vasily Rudich* □ British intellectuals in the Thatcher era *by Frank Johnson* □ Pater and Wilde *by Louis Auchincloss*

A. E. Housman *by Brad Leithauser* □ Hazlitt *by Joseph Epstein* □ T. E. Lawrence *by David Fromkin* □ Gerard Manley Hopkins *by Christopher Ricks* □ The Rimbaud centenary *by John Simon* □ "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" *by Jed Perl* □ Ad Reinhardt & the New York School *by Karen Wilkin* □ Theater in London & Paris *by Donald Lyons* □ Paul Johnson's "The Birth of the Modern" *by James Bowman* □ Václav Havel *by Stanislaw Baranczak* □ Augustine's "Confessions" *by C. H. Sisson* □ The canonization of Frida Kahlo *by Deborah Solomon* □ Parkman's histories *by James W. Tuttleton*

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Notes & Comments: June 1991

"Culture under Siege"—the politics of the Whitney Biennial

This spring the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York has mounted the largest and most expensive as well as the most political Biennial Exhibition of contemporary American art in its history. Works by one hundred painters, sculptors, photographers, and film and video artists fill all five floors of the museum's public exhibition space. This is the first time the Biennial has preempted all other activities and events at the Whitney, including the exhibition of its permanent collection. This is, without doubt, a Biennial with a mission.

What has compelled the special scale of this year's Biennial is not, however, any desire on the part of the Whitney curatorial staff to organize an exhibition that would accurately represent the diverse artistic achievements of American art at the present moment. At the Whitney, as with so many of our cultural institutions nowadays, an interest in "concerns"—meaning the programs of political pressure groups in the art world—has triumphantly supplanted an interest in artistic achievement. From these "concerns" are derived the tests, which are blatantly political tests, that works of art are now expected to meet to be considered for the Biennial. The only exceptions in the case of this year's Biennial are certain older artists who are exempted on the basis of prior reputation. Younger artists who fail to pass the requisite political tests are simply ignored.

The committee that sat in judgment over this Biennial is nothing if not explicit about the nature of these political tests—explicit, that is, for any reader practiced at parsing the poststructuralist political idiom that now passes for prose in the Brave New World of the contemporary exhibition catalogue. "If there is a single constant in the art exhibited here," writes Richard Armstrong, one of the curators on the Biennial jury, "it is to be found in the ongoing elaboration of the taste for quotidian imagery and techniques—for the recontextualized over the purely invented." Which, roughly translated, means: a preference for the political and propagandistic over the purely aesthetic. According to Mr. Armstrong, political art of this persuasion is "clearly the preferred vernacular of contemporary American art." Which means only that it is the preferred taste of the Whitney curators and the political pressure groups they are so eager to serve.

Another member of the Biennial jury—John G. Hanhardt—has also left us in no doubt as to what he was looking for in selecting the film and video contributions to the exhibition. It was primarily work concentrat-

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ing on what Mr. Hanhardt calls "important issues" that was deemed worthy of consideration, and these "important issues" were, of course, political rather than artistic issues. Again, the idiom may be odious, but the basic point is easily grasped. "These media artists," Mr. Hanhardt writes,

> are in fact contributing to the discourses that are redefining cultural practices. One crucial discourse concerns the changing definition of representation. . . . This investigation is renegotiating the boundaries between gender and sexuality through a deconstruction of the binary opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, a deconstruction that questions the very invention of those terms.

This is an example of what, for Mr. Hanhardt and his colleagues at the Whitney, counts as an "important issue"—if not *the* important issue—for art today.

It was left, however, to another of the Whitney curators—Lisa Phillips—to spell out in detail the hard-core political beliefs that govern this year's Biennial. In an essay called "Culture under Siege" for the catalogue of the exhibition, Miss Phillips has given us what amounts to a political manifesto—the first, as far as we can recall, to be issued by the Whitney. According to this manifesto, the controversies that have erupted over the arts in recent years—the public hearing that led to the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from the Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan, the uproar over NEA funding for Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition called "The Perfect Moment," etc.—all have a very simple explanation. Owing to what Miss Phillips calls "the excesses of American life in the eighties" and the end of the Cold War, "a scapegoat was needed" by "the reactionary right" for its "unfocused anxieties." With the loss of Communism as a "symbol of evil"—so this argument goes—the nation needed a new enemy, and it found one readily at hand in Messrs. Serra, Serrano, Mapplethorpe, and sundry others. As a result, Miss Phillips avers, our entire culture now finds itself "under siege."

Oddly enough, there is no mention in this political manifesto of the fact that the kind of art championed by Miss Phillips or her colleagues at the Whitney continues to enjoy an immense success in the galleries and museums—an in the mainstream press, too. In the universities, also, this is the art that commands esteem, emulation, and support. The art journals, needless to say, support it without even a hint of demurral. Yet Miss Phillips prattles on about "the nation's endemic anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and mistrust of artists." And she is particularly condemnatory about the few critics who were guilty, in her view, for "publicly expressing doubts" about the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, for example. Just imagine! Critics actually expressing "doubts" about the work of these sanctified artists. With friends like Lisa Phillips, freedom of expression needs no enemies. "Culture under Siege" is a perfect example of the extent to which the campaign for Political Correctness—which is a campaign to place strict political limits on our freedom of expression—has now established itself in the art world. It is not only this year's Biennial exhibition of contemporary American art that is illuminated by this political manifesto. The museum itself has been redefined by it.

PC comes to music

Politically Correct Thinking has now been turned on the core of the classical music repertory. Under the headline "Prokofiev, Hail . . . and Farewell?" an April article in the Sunday *New York Times* by Richard Taruskin, a professor of music at the University of California at Berkeley, applied this new standard of judgment to the work of the great Russian composer, one of the musical giants of our century. Professor Taruskin,

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writing from the fear-ridden and casualty-strewn battlefield of northern California, finds that despite their manifest musical virtues, Sergei Prokofiev's most beloved compositions, beginning with the film music for the Eisenstein film *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and ending with the Seventh Symphony (1951-52), may well deserve to disappear from the repertory. This is so because, as in the case of *Nevsky*, they "speak of a time now best consigned, so far as the performing repertory is concerned, to the dustbin of history."

If Professor Taruskin does not really find the fatal flaw of this music in the works themselves—he calls Prokofiev "an epic talent" —just where does he find it? Prokofiev's fault lies in his return to the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s from exile abroad, and in his going along with Stalin by continuing to write his music, sometimes for a pet Stalin project like the primitively nationalistic *Alexander Nevsky*, and sometimes, as in the prevailingly songful Cello Sonata (1949) and the serenely lyrical Seventh Symphony, as if the horrors of Stalin did not exist.

For Professor Taruskin, "What a piece of music says is not always or only what its composer meant to say." As a result, he judges the music of the Cello Sonata and the Seventh Symphony to be "saccharine stuff, and the most unlistenable of all to any who know what bloody hands enforced the pretty platitudes." Professor Taruskin, even going beyond blaming Prokofiev for complicity with Stalin, accuses him of cynicism and nihilism in his pre-Soviet modernist phrase; in a demonstration of the quality of mercy our intellectual pietists regularly dispense to the objects of their wrath, Professor Taruskin remarks: "It may not be entirely the unlucky composer's fault that he backed so many wrong horses, but he bears their indelible curse."

Veterans of the thought of Comrade Stalin will recognize this reasoning as directly drawn from the notion of objective guilt —the idea that nothing counts but the use made by others, and especially by history, of one's work. According to this test, the only applicable test in art and in life is whether human actions further or hinder the cause of progressive mankind, as defined retrospectively by a self-chosen elite. When applied to Prokofiev, this brutal and false test convicts the composer not just of having written beautiful music but of having survived in order to be able to do so.

The heart weeps at the callousness of this attitude. Were the Russian people, at the mercy of the bestial Stalin, to have naught for their comfort? Is Prokofiev's choosing to live, and even to write music, to be seen as culpable? Are our academic priests, now wearing the once clean robes of musicology, to demand personal heroism—as defined by themselves—as a price for musical regard?

To accept the later compositions of Prokofiev for the beauty they contain is hardly to condone Stalin's crimes. To condemn Stalin does not require the purging of culture; it requires facing the political consequences of political actions. To punish Prokofiev—and the music-loving audience—for having provided us with marvelously made and moving music is to give the Soviet dictator and murderer the last laugh, and a dirty one at that.

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Seurat, one hundred years later

by Hilton Kramer

Seurat knew many things, the sacred laws of common sense, which we neglect no doubt because they are too simple.

That it is not instinct that composes, but intellect; that instinct—genius—proposes and the lucid mind disposes, composes, translates the impulse, the imperfectly formed, sketchy need that we call inspiration....

A painter may intellectualize, and Seurat was not averse to doing so. But, ultimately, we know that certain works are possessed of that radiance, that sublimity, those resonances that no formula can measure, explain or dissect, but that we feel, that excite us, transport us, make us forget everything else. There are certain canvases by Seurat that have this magic.
—Amédée Ozenfant, in *Cahiers d'Art*, 1926

It was once commonplace for people—and very knowledgeable people, too—to speak of Seurat's painting as "scientific." All those dots of color were likened to atoms or molecules, and we were invited to see in the painter's method a harbinger of later scientific discoveries. Nowadays the smart thing—in the academy and in the art journals, anyway—is to speak of the paintings as political. In this reading, the figures and the *mise en scène* in Seurat's pictures are read as lessons in the kind of anomie and alienation inevitably to be expected in a society besotted with capitalist enterprise. The one view concentrated on the artist's technique. The other gives priority to his subject matter—or rather, to a certain extra-artistic interpretation of selective aspects of the subject matter. Together they have created what amounts at times to a formidable intellectual barrier obstructing a clear view of the art itself, and the irony is that it is a barrier that has been largely erected not by Seurat's enemies, of which he has had many, but by those who have championed his achievement.

Thus, Félix Fénéon—the critic who hailed Seurat as the new leader of the avant-garde when *Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte* was first shown in the last of the Impressionist exhibitions in 1886—referred to the "scientific manner" that the artist had introduced into painting, and went so far as to formulate elaborate equations intended to explain the scientific basis—what he repeatedly called "*la division scientifique du ton*"—of Seurat's painting. (Fortunately, this wasn't all that this fine critic had to say about Seurat or we wouldn't still be reading him with interest.) Even Matisse, whose brief adaptation of Seurat's pointillist method in *Luxe, calme, et volupté* (1904-5) served as a prelude to his first Fauve pictures, could still speak of painting "reduced to a scientific formula" when he recalled Seurat's influence thirty years later. He appears to have revised his view later on, however; in 1947, in a letter to Tériade, he wrote that "if there were not something more important than this in [Seurat's] pictures, he would be of no consequence. One is amazed to see that the colors of his pictures, placed with such care in the application of his theory, have so changed

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with time that the cadmium orange has become yellow ocher or even something less vibrant than that, but his paintings have lost nothing of their principal interest."

Will the time also come when it will once again be seen that what Matisse called the "principal interest" of Seurat's painting has nothing whatever to do with the far-fetched political readings that nowadays encumber it in the lecture hall and the seminar room? We can only hope so, for these readings effectively remove us from the experience of Seurat's art in the interest of an ideology that is completely at odds with the art itself. Consider, as a specimen, Professor Linda Nochlin's essay "Seurat's 'La Grande Jatte': An Anti-Utopian Allegory." Taking her cue from some remarks by the German Marxist writer Ernst Bloch, who described the scene depicted in *La Grande Jatte* as an example of what he called "landscapes of painted suicide"—Bloch even characterized the boats on the river in this painting as "belong[ing] more to Hades than to a Sunday"—Professor Nochlin says of Seurat that "he is the only one [of the Post-Impressionists] to inscribe the modern condition itself—with its alienation, anomie, the experience of living in a society of the spectacle, of making a living in a market economy," etc. Yet not everything in *La Grande Jatte* is found by Professor Nochlin to have this anti-Utopian meaning. In Seurat's pointillist method, for example, she discerns the vision of "a Utopian project indeed, from a radical standpoint." This method, she argues, can be seen to be a "foolproof" means "of creating a successful art which, theoretically, could be . . . a sort of democratically oriented, high-type painting-by-dots which would totally wipe out the role of genius, the exceptional creative figure, in the making of art, even 'great art'" —which would certainly have been news to Seurat, who jealously defended the authorship of his celebrated method and labored so strenuously to apply it to the creation of great art. Besides, the notion that Seurat's method might somehow be democratized and made "foolproof" for art without his eyes, his hand, and his mind—in other words, without "the role of genius"—is the sheerest poppycock. Even the most gifted of Seurat's disciples had a hard time making his method work for them, and none ever produced anything in their art to equal his. You would indeed have to be a radical Utopian —which is to say, an academic fantasist—to believe otherwise.

Still, Professor Nochlin reserves her wildest flight of political fancy not for *La Grande Jatte* but for a distinctly less interesting picture, *The Circus*. The whole paragraph that Professor Nochlin devotes to this exercise in political nuttiness is too long to quote here, but the conclusion that dwells on what she regards as the really "sinister" meaning of the painting must be cited.

> As well as standing for the public of art consumers, that audience [in *The Circus*], fixed in a state approaching hypnotic trance, may be read as signifying the condition of the mass public in relation to its manipulative masters. Thomas Mann's "Mario and the Magician" comes to mind, or Hitler and the crowd at Nuremberg, or, more recently, the American electorate and the performer-candidates who mouthed slogans and gesticulated with practiced artistry on television. *The Circus*, as an anti-Utopian allegory, has a certain predictive potential, in addition to inscribing the social problematic of its own day.[1]

It is appalling to think of intellectual bilge of this sort being regularly served up as serious art history at, for example, Yale University, where Professor Nochlin has lately been installed in a senior position. And she is by no means alone in this campaign to traduce Seurat—and so many other artists—for political purposes. She represents a movement that has swept the field.

If we lived in a happier time, the huge Seurat exhibition that has been mounted at the

1 "Seurat's 'La Grande Jatte': An Anti-Utopian Allegory," in Linda Nochlin's *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (Harper & Row, 1989), pages 182 and 187.

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Grand Palais in Paris this summer to mark the centenary of the artist's death would have had the effect of putting all this nonsense behind us.[2] But it turns out that even the passage of a century is not long enough for misunderstandings and willful misreadings of this sort to be put to rest in Seurat's case. In her essay for the voluminous catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Françoise Cachin—the director of the Musée d'Orsay—speaks of Seurat as more deserving than either Van Gogh or Gauguin to be regarded as the truly accursed—"*maudit*"—figure among the Post-Impressionists, and while she is referring specifically to the curious fate suffered by Seurat's art in his native France, this being the first time ever that the nation has honored the artist's achievement with a full-scale retrospective, it is a characterization that might well be applied to some of the disfiguring interpretations that have been made of Seurat both in and out of France. These, in any event, are the principal subject of Professor Robert L. Herbert's introduction to the catalogue of the current exhibition.

This essay by our leading scholarly authority on Seurat and the Neo-Impressionist movement is largely devoted to both the "science" question in Seurat and the problem of his politics. The "science" question is pretty much reduced to a non-question. Whatever the intensity of Seurat's interest in color theory, Professor Herbert rightly insists that his pictorial method was not, as he writes, "a scientific act, but an expression of [Seurat's] inventive imagination." As for the problem of Seurat's politics, Professor Herbert has a somewhat harder time settling on an exact description of what this may have consisted of—understandably, since there is so little evidence that Seurat took any interest in politics. What we know for certain is that many of Seurat's comrades in the Neo-Impressionist circle were anarchists. So, most conspicuously, was Fénéon, Seurat's great critical champion. Yet are we right to deduce from *their* political commitment a similar loyalty on Seurat's part? Inevitably, an attempt was made by the artist's anarchist friends to enlist Seurat, after his death, in their own political mission and thus confer a kind of posthumous political sainthood upon him when he could no longer speak for himself. Professor Herbert, despite his own loyalty to the Left, is too fine a scholar to go along with this facile act of political appropriation. Reluctantly, perhaps, he settles for a good deal less. "Seurat was probably on the Left," he writes, "but there is little chance that he was an anarchist." Alas, that wistful "probably" speaks volumes—but more about the politics of art history than about Seurat, who took the secret of his political beliefs (if, indeed, he had any) to his grave.[3]

When we turn from the realm of speculation and debate, which has encumbered Seurat's oeuvre with such a heavy burden of extraneous interpretation, to the extraordinary exhibition that Mme Cachin, Professor Herbert, and their colleagues in Paris and New York have organized on the centenary of his death, we find ourselves in the presence of an artist whose work calls for another kind of attention altogether. Seurat was an artist who gave painting a new "skin"—the pointillist skin that Degas, among other eminences, ridiculed as mere "petit point." Despite the awful brevity of his career—he was dead at the age of thirty-one—Seurat didn't accomplish this artistic feat overnight or all at once. On the contrary: his thoughtful, painstaking, methodical approach to every nuance of his art—the prodigious ratiocination he

2 "Seurat 1859-1891" opened on April 13 at the Grand Palais in Paris, where it remains on view through August 12. It will then move to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (September 24, 1991-January 12, 1992).

3 Professor Robert L. Herbert of Mount Holyoke College is the principal author of the catalogue —*Seurat* (Réunion des musées nationaux, 464 pages, 350 francs)—which also contains contributions by Françoise Cachin, Anne Distel, and Gary Tinterow. An English-language edition of the catalogue will be published when the exhibition opens at the Met in September.

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brought to bear upon all the expressive freedoms only recently achieved by the Impressionists—was one of the things that set him apart from the contemporaries and caused them to make so many jokes at his expense. (It was also, of course, what caused an entire avant-garde movement, to which Fénéon gave the name Neo-Impressionism, to draw inspiration from Seurat's example —a movement that continued to exert a discernible influence on advanced painting well into the twentieth century.) The pictures in which he created this new pictorial skin were not all of one kind, either. The landscapes Seurat painted in the very last years of his life—so "empty" of everything but the minutest subtleties of color and light, which are also miracles of minute observation—belong to a different order of experience from the major figure compositions that remain the principal focus of his fame. And the many studies for and alternative versions of the figure paintings belong to still another order. Their touch—freer, airier, less rigorously attached to a single method of application—is often far removed from the tiny dots of color that give the classical pointillist works their characteristic quality, and they sometimes achieve an even greater degree of abstraction.

Then there are the drawings, which in themselves constitute a sizable and parallel achievement. It is one of the special pleasures of this retrospective that there are so many of them. At the Grand Palais, we enter the exhibition by way of a long, darkened chamber devoted entirely to drawings, which range from early academic figure studies to the fully realized *conté* compositions of Seurat's quickly won maturity—drawings that absorb every motif into the incomparable poetry he brought to the drama of shadow and light. There are a good many drawings elsewhere in the exhibition, too; they are usually arranged thematically in relation to the major paintings. But this first gallery given over to nothing but drawings is a prologue of a kind I have not seen before in a major exhibition of this kind.

For one thing, it straightaway settles the question of the artist's mastery and originality. What remains to be explored thereafter are the directions in which they are taken. For another, it accustoms the eye to the small physical scale of the bulk of the paintings and drawings to be seen in the exhibition as a whole. And what is most important, I think, is the way this initial immersion in the drawings also settles the question of the *kind* of artist we have come to see on this occasion—an artist for whom both the intensity and the detachment of a certain kind of aesthetic concentration take precedence over every other artistic consideration. And this intensity and detachment of aesthetic concentration has the additional effect of putting the viewer on notice as to what will be expected of *him* in this exhibition, an attention to detail, to micro-shifts of light and texture, to subtleties of shape that seem to emerge at times out of a fine mist of optical sensation—a kind of attention, in other words, that is nowadays seldom demanded of the art we see. The sheer visual refinement that Seurat lavished on every aspect of his work is itself a lesson in the art of looking at works of art, and it is in the drawings that we meet its first challenge, for in the drawings, too, the artist gave a new "skin" to his medium and we are obliged to adjust our focus to its refinements lest we miss out on most of what he has created for us to see.

Of the many revelations about Seurat's painting that this retrospective offers us, the most important—for this viewer, anyway —was to be found in the landscapes that he produced in the very last years of his life. They are at once so abstract that the topographical features depicted in them seem to melt before our eyes in the very act of observing them, and yet so naturalistic that we feel at times we can almost measure the spaces that are so meticulously mapped out in the fixed frame of their composition. They are as radically new to painting as anything in late Monet or late Cézanne, and yet they issue from a sensibility very different from either. An ideal of solidity and fixity—the ideal of a truly classical art that had nothing to do with the dead hand of the Academy—governed

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the artist's entire conception of these landscapes, yet he knew that in choosing these subjects for his art, which were not so much the fixed features of landscape as the veil of shifting light that enveloped them at every moment of observation, Seurat was choosing the most evanescent subject that a painter of classical sensibility could possibly set himself to encompass. He was clearly an artist who prized difficulty as much as he prized clarity and order, and in these landscapes he achieved, I think, the most perfect realization of the aesthetic complexity he aspired to. As it happened, I was able to see the big *Bathers, Asnières* at the National Gallery in London just a few days after leaving the Seurat show at the Grand Palais, and I was a little shocked to discover that it looked almost conventional after a few hours spent in the company of those later landscapes. For me, they are Seurat's greatest paintings.

Finally, a word about the "meaning" of Seurat's subject matter. Not everyone goes as far as Ernst Bloch in finding in Seurat's painting of the urban and suburban scene "landscapes of painted suicide," but a lot of fuss *is* made about the modern subjects he chose to paint. I wonder if I am alone in feeling that altogether *too much* fuss has been made of this matter? After all, it wasn't Seurat who introduced the modern urban scene to nineteenth-century French painting. It was already a staple of Impressionist painting when Seurat was just getting started. And even earlier, of course, it was Baudelaire who announced that the great task of modern painting would be the painting of modern life. He had the right idea, too, even though he nominated the wrong artist—Guys—as its outstanding representative. In this ambition to become a painter of modern life, Seurat actually initiated very little. He had a characteristic way of depicting the modern city and its outlying districts that was different from that of the many other artists who essayed similar subjects, but his choice of modernity as his *mise en scène* was not the thing that defined his originality or his mastery. Again, I suppose it all comes down to politics, and the need to find in Seurat an artist who answers to the ideology of his political interpreters. It is not the least of the pleasures of this wonderful retrospective that it makes such interpretations seem more irrelevant than ever—at least for those who have eyes for the art itself.

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Fredric Jameson's laments

by Roger Kimball

[I]t is rather the essential "innocence" of intellectuals which is here in question: this private inner game of theoretical "convictions" and polemics against imaginary conceptual antagonists and mythic counterpositions, . . . of passionate private languages and private religions, which, entering the field of force of the real social world, take on a murderous and wholly unsuspected power.
—Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*

Among the stars twinkling in the academic firmament these days, none twinkles more formidably than the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson. Having taught at Harvard, Yale, and at various campuses of the University of California, Professor Jameson is now ensconced at Duke University—that favored perch for so many academic twinklers today—where he is William A. Lane Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of the Graduate Program in Literature as well as the Duke Center for Critical Theory. His influence in the academy is as widespread as his epigones are numerous. Graduate students and fellow professors eagerly lap up and regurgitate his latest pronouncements on "late capitalism," etc.; recondite academic journals devote entire issues to pondering his work; and admiring acolytes publish commentaries that attempt to unravel the "demanding argument" of his "seminally important" books, describing him along the way as "the most important Marxist critic now writing."

Like most Marxists, Professor Jameson likes to refer to art and to intellectual work as a "mode of production"; certainly, there is no more polite term for his own prodigious output. Since publishing *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (1961; new edition 1984), a revision of his Ph.D. dissertation for Yale University, Professor Jameson has been a veritable factory for the production of books and articles that blend some degree of Marxist "engagement" with a finely honed exhibition of the most *au courant* critical rhetoric. A partial list of his books includes *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (1971), *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (1972), *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979), *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), and *The Ideologies of Theory*, a two-volume compilation of essays (Volume I, "Situations of Theory," Volume II, "Syntax of History") published in 1988. Among his more recent publications are *Signatures of the Visible*, a collection of essays about the movies and mass culture, and *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.[1] The book about postmodern-

1 *Signatures of the Visible* is published by Routledge, Chapman & Hall (256 pages, $25) and *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is published by Duke University Press (440 pages, $34.95).

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ism is also a collection of essays, but its lengthy methodological reflections and Professor Jameson's remark that it is intended to be "the third and last section of the penultimate subdivision of a larger project entitled *The Poetics of Social Forms*" help to suffuse it with the atmosphere—if not, finally, the reality—of systematic inquiry.

Indeed, "atmosphere" has surely counted for rather a lot in the reception Professor Jameson's work has enjoyed. While his subject and vocabulary are always strictly *à la mode*, his syntax and organization have usually been almost decorously pedantic, even ponderous. As the invocation of the "penultimate subdivision of a larger project" suggests, Professor Jameson loves the rigorous-sounding argot of formal academic prose. His books are full of technicalities, *wissenschaftlich* grace notes—well, notes, anyway—and schematic diagrams replete with arrows and dotted lines connecting various abstract terms. Whether his work actually possesses the conceptual rigor that such decorations connote is something we shall have occasion to consider; it is unlikely, at any rate, that anyone will accuse Professor Jameson of ignoring his own warning against "the mischief of premature clarification."

Yet whatever one's judgment about the clarity or fruitfulness of Professor Jameson's work—to say nothing of his influence or his political ideas—it is difficult not to be impressed by his unflagging energy and earnestness. Most of his books are at least partly attempts to come to terms with some fashionable new critical method or school of thought. And if one must conclude that his efforts at exposition are often as bewildered as they are bewildering, there is no doubt that he possesses a tirelessly inquiring mind: no one would saturate himself so thoroughly in so many arcane theories *merely* to be fashionable. While this does nothing to exempt his work from criticism, it does endow it with a certain pathos.

In any event, besides Sartre—and, of course, the writings of Marx himself—the formative influences on Professor Jameson's prose and style of thought are such certified left-wing saints as Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin, and, above all, Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno. In the background is the figure of Hegel with his doctrine of necessary historical progress. What it all adds up to is a heady brew of radical utopianism (from Marcuse and Bloch), seasoned with the pretense of scientific rigor (from Althusser) and an aestheticized Marxism (from Benjamin). In addition, from Lukács Professor Jameson learned a contempt for the evidence of experience (empiricism, he declared in *The Political Unconscious*, is "a contradiction in terms") as well the talismanic charm that words like "reification," "ideology," and "dialectical" can have over susceptible minds. And from Adorno he learned—indeed, he mastered—the joys of epistemological skepticism and difficult "dialectical" writing. (Compared to Adorno, Hegel reads like Dr. Johnson.) More recently, Professor Jameson has drawn on the whole panoply of chic contemporary theorists, from the two Jacques (Derrida and Lacan) to Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and many, many others.

The case of Adorno is particularly instructive. In the preface to *Marxism and Form*, Professor Jameson speaks admiringly of the German philosopher as "the finest stylist . . . of them all," a writer in whose sentences "the shifting of the world's gears . . . find[s] sudden and dramatic formulation. It is not," he portentously adds, "a question of *taste*, any more than the validity of dialectical thinking is a question of *opinion*." This is History speaking, you understand (Professor Jameson often employs a capital "H" for the word "history"), not simply the bleatings of a philosophically inclined professor of literature. It may be useful, then, to make a quick reality check and sample a bit of Adorno's prose. In a typical passage from *Negative Dialectics*, his chief philosophical work, the finest stylist of them all writes that

> No matter how nondimensional we may make Being, how we may compress it into a point by

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> the permanent exercise of caution in both directions, the procedure does have its *fundamentum in re*. Categorial vision, the growing awareness of a concept, reminds us that categorially constituted facts, which traditional epistemology knew as syntheses only, must always have a corresponding moment beyond the sensory *hyle* [i.e., matter]. They always have something immediate about them, something resembling visuality. A simple mathematical theorem would not apply without the synthesis of the figures between which the equation is set up, and neither . . . would a synthesis be possible if the relation of elements were not in line with this synthesis . . .

Perhaps that noise you hear is the world's gears grinding away; but then again it may only be the gnashing of teeth. (Adorno does not, I regret to say, read any better in German.)

It is worth recalling this patch of Teutonic fog—and Professor Jameson's judgment about its author—as one tries to evaluate some of the more extravagant claims made on Professor Jameson's behalf. For example, Terry Eagleton, the British literary critic who is Professor Jameson's chief rival for the title of "most important Marxist critic now writing," [2] has delivered himself of lavish praise for the Jamesonian style. "Jameson composes rather than writes his texts," he wrote in one essay, "and his prose . . . carries an intense libidinal charge, a burnished elegance and unruffled poise, which allows him to sustain a rhetorical lucidity through the most tortuous, intractable materials." In another essay, "Fredric Jameson: The Politics of Style," Professor Eagleton goes even further:

> I must acknowledge that I take a book of his from the shelf as often in place of poetry or fiction as literary theory. . . . If 'literary criticism' is to be one day justified at the judgement seat of history—if we will be able to claim that it played a bit part in the averting of fascism or nuclear holocaust—Jameson may have the oppressive pleasure of knowing that that his is one of the forlornly few names we will stammeringly evoke.

Amen. Again, though, a reality check is in order. How do you reckon the following passage from *The Political Unconscious* will measure up as a prophylactic against fascism?

> The constitutive feature of the Balzacian narrative apparatus, however, is something more fundamental than either authorial omniscience or authorial intervention, something that may be designated as libidinal investment or authorial wish-fulfillment, a form of symbolic satisfaction in which the working distinction between biographical subject, Implied Author, reader, and characters is virtually effaced.

True, libidinal charges and investments are high on the wish-lists of these Marxist critics; but does that transform their prose into a nuclear deterrent? Consider: "The postmodern period, however," Professor Jameson tells us in his new book on the subject, "eschews temporality for space and has generally grown skeptical about deep phenomenological experience in general, and the very concept of perception itself in particular (see Derrida)."

Part of what has made Professor Jameson so appealing to his academic colleagues is his enthusiastic industriousness; one can go to his newest book and be sure of getting news about the latest literary-critical fad *from the inside*. For while his books typically contain a good deal of summary and recapitulation of whatever intellectual theories are currently on their way up—*The Prison House of Language*, for example, is really little more than an introduction to the central texts and tenets of structuralism—Professor Jameson always takes the trouble to work through the material and to present it with his own distinctive twist. In this sense, his books resemble daily weather reports: they're often wrong, but they're always up to date.

2 See my article "The Contradictions of Terry Eagleton" in *The New Criterion* for September 1990, pages 17-23.

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Then, too, Professor Jameson's version—or versions—of Marxism are pleasingly, well, *sophisticated*. It's rare that you find him arguing for economic determinism or the proletariat or the revolution in any straightforward way. True, he is able to write, without irony, that "Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past" or that "Marxist critical insights" provide "something like an ultimate *semantic* precondition for the intelligibility of literary and cultural texts." But in fact he by no means allows himself to be hemmed in by what he oftens calls "properly Marxist" interpretations. He regularly updates, supplements, *massages* ideas culled from Marx while mixing and matching interpretive categories drawn from later Marxist and quasi-Marxist thinkers. If this makes for rather a thick stew, so be it. His main task is not to explain but to *interpret*: to affirm "the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts," emerging therefrom slightly but perceptibly to the left of his interlocutors. And in this Professor Jameson has shown himself to be a something of a master.

In the end, it is not Marxism so much as a generalized left-leaning radicalism—what the critic Frederick Crews aptly summed up as Left Eclecticism—that informs Professor Jameson's critical enterprise. Marxism itself functions as a reservoir of slogans and political animus, but its fundamental tenets are often neglected in favor of other more recherché critical approaches and attitudes. At the beginning of *Signatures of the Visible*, for example, Professor Jameson claims that "The visual is *essentially* the pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination." While certainly a fatuously provocative claim, there is nothing specifically Marxist about it. Nor is there anything specifically Marxist about his claim that the movie *Diva* is an expression of "the political unconsciousness," that Joseph Conrad's novel *Nostromo* is "a textual apparatus for registering auditory perceptions of a particularly pure type," or that Hemingway's novels are not really about "such things as courage, love, and death" but "simply the writing of a certain type of sentence." Marxism isn't the only form of political balderdash.

Even when he deliberately invokes Marxist categories, Professor Jameson's interpretations are often so thoroughly academicized that their political point dissolves in a vaguely leftist haze. Consider his comments on *Wuthering Heights*: "Heathcliff," he writes,

> is the locus of *history* in this romance: his mysterious fortune makes him a protocapitalist, in some other place, absent from the narrative, which then recodes the new economic energies as sexual passion. The aging of Heathcliff then constitutes the narrative mechanism whereby the alien dynamism of capitalism is reconciled with the immemorial (and cyclical) time of the agricultural life of a country squiredom. . . . To see "Heathcliff" as a historical modification of the function of the donor thus allows us to glimpse the ideologeme—the conceptual antinomy but also the social contradiction—which generates the narrative, but which it is the latter's mission to "resolve."

When applied to some authors, Professor Jameson's procedure borders on the surreal. We find the exquisite lyric poetry of Wallace Stevens, for example, dissected as "an extraordinary laboratory situation in which to observe the autonomization of culture as a process," a process in which "the poetic 'totality' begins to trace a ghostly *mimesis* of the totality of the imperialist world system itself, with Third World materials in a similarly strategic, marginal, yet essential place." What happened to Stevens? Thus does the author of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* become the author of *Notes toward a Supreme Farce*. Even the bric-a-brac of Frank Gehry's "deconstructivist" architecture is enlisted in this misty Left Eclecticism: "The problem, then, which the Gehry house tries to think is the relationship between that abstract knowledge [of "American space"] and conviction or belief and the superstate and the existential daily life of people in their traditional rooms and tract houses." Gehry's house is a pretentious curiosity, to be sure,

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but it is not the tortured manifesto that Professor Jameson's descripion would lead us to expect.

Another classic way in which Professor Jameson announces his political *bona fides* is through ritual expressions of anti-Americanism interlaced with admiring noises about China, the Third World, and so on. "I doubt," he writes in the preface to *Marxism and Form*, "if there are many people left who feel that there is much in either art or in our society itself—at least in the extreme that it has reached in the United States today—which is worth salvaging." He later laments that "Unfortunately, no society has ever been quite so mystified in quite so many ways as our own." We must of course be grateful that, having escaped such widespread mystification himself, he has come bearing news of our distress.

Nevertheless, if things are bad in this country, at least there is hope in other parts of the world. For example, in an essay called "Marxism and Historicism" (1979) Professor Jameson writes admiringly about the "structural coexistence of several modes of production" that the Chinese experience of "'cultural revolution'" has made available to us, while in "Periodizing the 60s" (1984) he speaks of Maoism as the "richest of all the great new ideologies of the 60s." In that same essay, he rhapsodizes about the "voluntaristic acts" of guerrillas and other "new revolutionary subjects" who "transcend class categories." And in case the word "guerrilla" worries you, Professor Jameson offers assurances that Marxism dissociates itself from "what is often loosely called 'terrorism'"; moreover, according to him, terrorism is largely "a symptomatic fantasy of the American political unconscious" that "for all practical purposes [came] to an end with the Chilean coup in 1973." I feel sure that the families of the 250 Marines who died in a terrorist attack in Lebanon in the early Eighties will be consoled by Professor Jameson's assurances that "for all practical purposes" terrorism was over long ago, as will the friends and relatives of those who perished on the Pan Am plane that was destroyed by terrorists over Lockerbie, Scotland, a few years ago.

Perhaps Professor Jameson's most flexible tool of critical legerdemain is the word "dialectical." At bottom it is little more than a positive epithet, putting the reader on notice that whatever it qualifies ("dialectical *thinking*," "dialectical *criticism*," etc.) has the Jameson Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. And as a mask for banality or an agent of mystification it is really quite wonderful. Generally, describing something as "dialectical" means little more than that it appears one way when viewed from one perspective, quite differently when viewed from another perspective. Sometimes, though, the term produces a convenient tautology, as when Professor Jameson solemnly informs us that "for Adorno—as indeed for Hegel, as for all dialectical thinkers to the degree that they are genuinely dialectical—thinking dialectically means nothing more or less than the writing of dialectical sentences." On other occasions it provides rhetorical effects of which even Polonius would be proud. What, Professor Jameson asks, is dialectical criticism?

> It can be described as a kind of leap-frogging affair in time, in which the drawbacks of a given historical situation turn out in reality to be its secret advantages, in which what looked like built-in superiorities suddenly prove to set the most ironclad limits on its future development. It is a matter, indeed, of the reversal of limits, of the transformation from negative to positive and from positive to negative; and is basically a diachronic process.

". . . basically a diachronic process" is an exquisite Polonian flourish, to be sure; and if the idea still isn't clear, Professor Jameson follows up with an "objective" illustration having to do with technological discrepancies between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II.

Finally, however, what makes "dialectical" indispensible is the existential—or is it theological?—charge with which Professor Jame-

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son invests the term. Describing dialectical criticism as "an operation of rectification, of almost ontological restitution," he goes on to note that its only real competitor is religious criticism. (Religion, incidentally, he defines as "that set of imaginary propositions which must be believed to be true if the theoretical consequences of Marxism are to be avoided" and "anticipatory foreshadowings of historical materialism.")

Alas, the idea that dialectical criticism somehow entails an "ontological restitution" brings us more or less to the center of Professor Jameson's critical enterprise. For although he is as adept at dispensing skepticism and disenchantment as any critic now writing, there is a deep element of romantic utopianism in Professor Jameson's thought. The precise components of that utopianism are difficult to parse because he is careful to embroider it with all manner of Marxist warnings against "idealism," "false consciousness," and other forms of bourgeois illusion: the "dialectical" criticism he practices is nothing if not negative. But like Marxism itself, the Jamesonian creed could not function without the promise of something like salvation, however dour or severe. Thus it is that Professor Jameson insists on "the necessity of the reinvention of the Utopian vision in any contemporary politics," identifying the utopian impulse as "part of the legacy of the sixties which must never be abandoned."

The basic scenario is a familiar one. In brief, Professor Jameson argues that the "contradictions of capitalism" will be resolved and freedom will reign when a new, communistic "mode of production" allows us to transcend the limiting need for individuality, as well as private property, social hierarchies, power relations, etc. Marxism, he writes in one typical passage, is "the anticipatory expression of a future society, . . . the partisan commitment to that future or Utopian mode of production which seeks to emerge from the hegemonic mode of production of our own present." We should not, however, think that we *as individuals* can enter utopia, for "a properly Marxist hermeneutic" requires that individual utopias be "rewritten in terms of the collective": "Dialectical thought," we are told, is the "anticipation of the logic of a collectivity which has not yet come into being."

In good Hegelian-Marxist fashion, the achievement of freedom is at the same time the realization of Necessity (again, Professor Jameson's captial) and the fulfillment of History. In one sense, this great social advance is at the same time a return to an earlier state insofar as "The primary energy of revolutionary activity derives from [a] memory of a prehistoric happiness." While the prehistoric state is variously identified with primitive communism and prenatal existence ("we have known, at the beginning of life, a plenitude of psychic gratification"), not much is said about it or the collective existence that it presages.

We do learn, however, that in this utopian future the literature of "power societies" "will be read as children's books, recapitulating the barely comprehensible memory of ancient dangers." Moreover, art generally—at least when it is genuine—has as its "underlying impulse . . . our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life" and aims to "reawaken" the "drive towards collectivity." Hence we should "rid ourselves" of the habit of reading as an individual: rid ourselves, that is to say, of thinking about "my *personal* reading of an *individual* text written by a biographical individual names [*sic*] Spenser or Juvenal."

In *The Political Unconscious*, Professor Jameson attempts to picture utopia by means of allegory. Drawing on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and medieval Christian theology, he elaborates a complex fourfold scheme of interpretation in which Dante's theory of mystical or anagogic meaning is recast in terms of politics. It cannot be said that this really helps to explain what the alternative to reading "as an individual" might be; but one suspects from his more recent work that it will have something to do with the movies and pop culture. Much of Professor Jameson's work since the mid-

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Eighties has been devoted to "transcoding" pop culture, and the results of his efforts are often deliriously "collective." In *Signatures of the Visible*, for example, Professor Jameson informs us that the pulp horror movie called *The Shining* gestures faintly toward an "anticipatory representation of the Utopian community of the future." Its star, Jack Nicholson, is, according to Professor Jameson, "possessed by . . . History," while the movie itself expresses "the longing for collectivity" and is at bottom a "depth analysis and 'working out' of the class fantasies of contemporary American society." Clearly, a large dollop of credulity is neccessary to appreciate the workings of the dialectic.

If all this seems obscure, rest assured that it *is* obscure. But then we should recall that the real meaning of "utopia" is "no place." Whatever Professor Jameson's personal commitment to Marxist doctrine, there can be little doubt that his habits of thought are deeply tinged by the gnostic contempt for everyday experience and faith in a secular apocalypse that has characterized Marxism from the beginning. As the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski noted in the third volume of his magisterial study, *Main Currents of Marxism,* this is the ultimate source of Marxism's utopian dreams and its great seductiveness for suitably disposed intellectuals. "The influence that Marxism has achieved," Kolakowski wrote,

> far from being the result or proof of its scientific character, is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic, and irrational elements. Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us just around the corner. Almost all the prophecies of Marx and his followers have already proved to be false, but this does not disturb the spiritual certainty of the faithful, any more than it did in the case of chiliastic sects. . . . In this sense Marxism performs the function of a religion, and its efficacy is of a relgious character. But it is a caricature and a bogus form of religion, since it presents its temporal eschatology as a scientific system, which religious mythologies do not purport to be.

That the Marxist apocalypse is declared to be the inevitable result of inscrutable "scientific" laws only means that its partisans are potentially as dangerous as they are mystifying: the revolutionary is one whose possession of "the truth" is impervious to experience. For him, "History" speaks with a voice beyond contradiction or appeal.

While the prospect of utopia has receded somewhat in his recent work—in one place in *Postmodernism*, he comes close to identifying utopia with the status quo of postmodern society—Professor Jameson cannot be said to have abandoned his faith in History. Nevertheless history sometimes seems to have failed him. Confronting the increasing chaos of postmodern society, Professor Jameson's primary response is one of bafflement and retreat. Reading through his essays on postmodernism, one realizes that in many respects "postmodernism" has come to replace "dialectic" as a favored theoretical term. Yet even more than its predecesor, "postmodernism" remains a word in search of a definition. Professor Jameson doesn't provide one, and he knows it. Thus he describes the theory of postmodernism as an "effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments."

On the one hand, in addition to declaring himself a "relatively enthusiastic consumer" of postmodern culture, Professor Jameson champions postmodernism as a source of new "energies" and cultural dynamism. On the other hand, he regards postmodernism as a synonym for "late capitalism," "another systemic modification of capitalism." "This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture," he writes, "is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror." And yet he dismisses the modernist critique of postmodernism as a return to bourgeois individualism and "quaint romantic values" like genius: "woe to the country," he writes in a moment of rare directness, "that needs

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geniuses, prophets, Great Writers, or demiurges!"

What is the alternative? Professor Jameson is too busy boning up on cyberpunk, MTV, and performance art to formulate a compelling response. In the end, *Postmodernism* may be said to represent Professor Jameson's substitution of capitulation for an analysis of culture: he is fond of postmodern architecture and music, he confides, and "Food and fashion have also greatly improved, as has the life world generally." Perhaps it is just that life in Durham, North Carolina, as the William A. Lane Professor of Comparative Literature is not so bad. In any event, one suspects that Professor Jameson's seemingly insatiable appetite for intellectual novelty has finally given him a bad case of conceptual indigestion. What we are presented with in his new books is the spectacle of an intellectual whose longstanding commitment to gnostic pieties and fashionable politicized aestheticism has at last led him to abandon seriousness altogether.

Of course, it might simply be an instance of the dialectic inverting things. But one somehow doubts that in this instance Professor Jameson would be so quick to agree. As he noted in his book on Wyndham Lewis, the intellectual's "private inner game of theoretical 'convictions' and polemics against imaginary conceptual antagonists and mythic counterpositions" can indeed have grim consequences in what he would surely disdain to call the real world. Perhaps it is a simple case of fatigue. Or maybe it is an illustration of Raymond Aron's old point that Marxism is the opiate of the intellectuals.

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Said's music

by Samuel Lipman

Edward Said is a man of parts. Born in Jerusalem in 1935 to Christian Arab parents, he spent his adolescent years in Cairo, and then was educated in the United States at Princeton and Harvard. A specialist in English and comparative literature and an advocate of the new textual approaches in literary studies, he has taught at Harvard, has been a visiting professor at Johns Hopkins and Yale, and has been the Christian Gauss lecturer in criticism at Princeton; at present he is Old Dominion Foundation Professor in Humanities at Columbia. He is the author of several acclaimed books, including *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), *Orientalism* (1978), and *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). He has received numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship (1972-73) and the first Lionel Trilling Award at Columbia (1976).

Professor Said is also the most prominent political spokesman for the Palestinians in the United States. He has written widely on the Palestinian and more general Arab causes; these writings include *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *Covering Islam* (1981), and *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986). His journalistic commentary on the Middle East appears frequently in this country and England, and he is an official representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the U.S.

But Professor Said is more than a literary critic and an Arabist. He is a dedicated amateur musician and pianist, with a particular interest in the great classics of Western music from Bach to Richard Strauss. For several years he has been writing lengthy articles on the New York musical scene in the left-wing *Nation*. These articles have been generally of a severe cast, and quite elitist in their high standards and unsparing demands.

Now Professor Said has brought the three parts of his life—the new literary studies, the Arab political cause, and the music he loves—together. Through the good offices of the Columbia University Press, he has recently published *Musical Elaborations*,[1] his 1989 Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California at Irvine. Though the subject—perhaps it might better be called the object—of these lectures is the music Professor Said knows and loves, the critical approach he has taken is very much in keeping with the prevailing postmodern attitude of the Wellek Lectures, which have included presentations by such avatars of the new deconstructionist sensibility as Perry Anderson, Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, and Jean-François Lyotard.

At the outset, Professor Said makes his purpose clear. He wants to treat music as he and others have treated literature, and though it is only *playing* (his italics) that fully satisfies him, he urges upon his readers the identification of the social, historical, and cultural factors that have given great music its currency. He praises recent academic musicology, but finds it "reverential," one assumes

1 *Musical Elaborations*, by Edward W. Said; Columbia University Press, 109 pages, $19.95.

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because musicology still finds music too pure to be discussed in terms of sociology, anthropology, and politics. He does find value in the willingness of such younger scholars as Rose Subotnik and Carolyn Abbate to examine music from outside music itself, but he finds these studies, including their use of deconstruction, narratology, and feminist theory, only in their infancy. He tells us that we have learned much about how culture operates from Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, about how to examine a text from Derrida, Hayden White, and Fredric Jameson, and about gender from Elaine Showalter, Germaine Greer, and Gayatri Spivak; but he laments that despite the existence of these rich insights, we have few who write about music in the way that Raymond Williams wrote about literature.

Accordingly, Professor Said points out that the roles played by music are extraordinarily varied, and include the linkage between music and privilege, between music and nation, and between music and religious veneration. He is a great, though not total, admirer of the German Marxist sociologist and music critic Theodor Adorno. He accepts Adorno's idea of the "regression of hearing," the notion that the level of the musical audience has been lowered by the substitution of passive listening in concerts and recordings for active participation through amateur performance and score-reading. He does not, however, go along with Adorno's Hegelian conception of music as teleologically mirroring the emptiness and destruction of the capitalist world. Professor Said prefers to see music as existing geographically and spatially, bound to its origins in place and the physical surroundings in which it is performed. He cites the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's opinion that music plays a part in the conquest of civil society, but he finds that not all music is a part of the domination of others; some music is dissenting, addressing issues of what Professor Said calls "solitude, memory, and affirmation."

All this is contained in the introduction to *Musical Elaborations*, and prefigures the longer discussion which follows. In "Performance as an Extreme Occasion," the first of the book's three chapters, Professor Said cites the literary critic Richard Poirier's conception of the performing self, and quotes Poirier to the effect that "Performance is an exercise of power, a very anxious one." For Professor Said, these words apply with special force to musical performers, who for him have used their virtuoso abilities and their single-minded concentration on their work to distance themselves from the listener, who is thereby placed "in a relatively weak and not entirely admirable position." He goes on to acknowledge "the listener's poignant speechlessness as he/she faces an onslaught of such refinement, articulation, and technique as almost to constitute a sado-masochistic experience."

As an example of this phenomenon of dominance, Professor Said cites the playing of Chopin Etudes by the Italian pianist Maurizio Pollini, whom he accuses of using his technical mastery to "completely dispatch any remnant of Chopin's original intention for the music, which was to afford the pianist, any pianist, an entry into the relative seclusion and reflectiveness of problems of technique." Performance, thus separated from composition, "therefore constitutes a special form of ownership and work."

Professor Said is particularly concerned with the practice of transcription, whereby music written for one instrument or combination of instruments is, through a kind of alchemical virtuosity, made into the property of a performer on another instrument. He talks about Glenn Gould's marvelous playing of transcriptions of Beethoven symphonies and complicated Wagner excerpts, and calls this mastery a wish "to reassert the pianist's prerogative to dominate over all other fields of music."

Noticing that concert performers no longer play much contemporary music, Professor Said finds Western classical-music concerts are now

> highly concentrated, rarefied, and extreme occasions. They have a commercial rationale that

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> is connected not just to selling tickets and booking tours but also to selling records for the benefit of large corporations. Above all, the concert occasion itself is the result of a complex historical and social process . . . that can be interpreted as a cultural occasion staked upon specialized eccentric skills, upon the performer's interpretive and histrionic personality fenced in by his or her obligatory muteness, upon the audience's receptivity, subordination, and paying patience. What competes with these occasions is not the amateur's experience but other displays of specialized skills (sports, circus, dance contests) that, at its worst and most vulgar, the concert may attempt to match.

Professor Said does not go so far as to castigate the conductor Arturo Toscanini, in the fashion of Joseph Horowitz's recent biography. Indeed, though he recognizes the disturbing (to him) fact of Toscanini's corporate success, he greatly admires the conductor's unsentimental 1938 performance of the Beethoven Symphony no. 3, the *Eroica*, in which he finds the conductor "trying to force into prominence, or perhaps enforce, the utterly contrary quality of the performance occasion, its total discontinuity with the ordinary, regular, or normative processes of everyday life."[2]

Once again, Professor Said returns to his much-admired Gould, who for him attempted, both through the genius of his playing and his decision to give up the routinized existence of a touring artist, to integrate his music with the world—without giving up its "reinterpretive, reproductive" aspect. For Professor Said, this is "the Adornian measure of Gould's achievement, and also its limitations, which are those of a late capitalism that has condemned classical music to an impoverished marginality and anti-intellectualism sheltered underneath the umbrella of 'autonomy.'"

2 I am not aware of the existence of this 1938 Toscanini performance; I wonder whether Professor Said is not referring to the 1939 RCA recording with the NBC Symphony, which has recently been made available on a Japanese RCA LP, RCL-3348.

The second chapter of *Musical Elaborations* is called "On the Transgressive Elements in Music." Here Professor Said uses the word "transgressive" to describe the ability music has "to travel, cross over, drift from place to place in a society, even though many institutions and orthodoxies have sought to confine it." But Professor Said quickly embarks on an elaborate discussion of the late deconstructionist literary critic Paul de Man, much in the news lately for his anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi sympathies during World War II. He treats, but does not resolve, the question of whether de Man's later intellectual work is to be held hostage to his earlier political views. These early views seem particularly offensive to Professor Said not simply because of their anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi character, but because de Man entertained the idea of "the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe." For Professor Said, this means that de Man had joined the Zionists in advocating Jewish domination over the Palestinians, and thus provided "dramatic confirmation of the links between right-wing and even fascist European thought and Zionism itself." For Professor Said, these links include scholarly evidence of "connections between right-wing Zionism—whose most famous living representative is Yitzhak Shamir—and officials of the Third Reich, including Adolf Eichmann."

From this it is a quick jump back to music, as Professor Said points out that in the *Ring* Wagner created the villain Alberich, modeled on an anti-Semitic stereotype and at the same time displaying in his "willing acceptance of lovelessness and damnation . . . [an] unremitting desire for world conquest [that] adumbrates the appalling designs of the 1000-year *Reich*." Even the novelist Thomas Mann, whose *Doctor Faustus* (1949) is at once the greatest work of fiction ever written about a musician and a chilling indictment of Germany in the first four decades of the twentieth century, cannot escape Professor Said's net: for him, the novel, in its characterization of a whole people and a whole culture, unpleasantly displays the European imperial drive to "judge, theorize, and totalize simultaneously."

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Consistent with the importance Professor Said gives to the notion of domination, he sees music performance, only a "little" dramatized, as "a police regime of the signifier." Even Mozart, on this view, was aligned at Salzburg with Nazi *völkisch* ideology. For Professor Said, the repertory everywhere displays the power of this "police regime." At the Metropolitan Opera, Italian *bel canto* and *verismo* operas have crowded out Czech, French, British, Russian, and most German operas; in orchestra concerts, Austro-German compositions have crowded out French, Czech, Spanish, and Russian music. Bach, too, is not exempt from criticism: according to Professor Said, the great length of the B-minor Mass is an example not only of Bach's "authorial productivity" but also of his "ambition to win a place of noticeable importance in the entourage of a prince."

As Professor Said moves from his second to his third and final chapter, he discusses music that transgresses the role it has been allotted in society. This music includes the cynical and witty *Così fan tutte* of Mozart and the abstruse variations on *Vom Himmel hoch* of Bach, which, writes Said, "dangles pretty much as pure musicality in a social space off the edge." He devotes much space to his own reaction to the pianist Alfred Brendel's Carnegie Hall performance of the Brahms Variations opus 18. This is music that emphasizes what Professor Said once again calls in the title of his third chapter "Melody, Solitude, and Affirmation." From Proust, he takes a notion of melody as the distinguishing feature of a composer; this characteristic melody then speaks directly and privately to the listener, communicating what Professor Said calls the music of the music. He has a particular affinity for pieces written as variations, rather than in sonata form; they are timeless, elaborative, and free; by contrast, sonata form is goal-driven, masterful, and thus hegemonic. The chief function of the Brendel Brahms performance in Professor Said's life was to send him back to the piano, to himself play what Brendel had played. Thus the highest compliment Professor Said can pay to music is that it inspires him to his own amateur performance.

More widely, he finds that Beethoven freed music to be ruminative and exfoliative, and that Richard Strauss set an example in his late works of doing without the assertion of a "central authorizing identity." *Musical Elaborations* ends with a tribute to Strauss's *Metamorphosen* (1944-45), an elegy mourning the destruction of the German musical world Strauss had helped to create, and based on intricate transformations of a fragment from the Funeral March of the Beethoven *Eroica*:

> [M]usic thus becomes an art not primarily about authorial power and social authority, but a mode for thinking through or thinking with the integral variety of human cultural practices, generously, non-coercively, and, yes, in a utopian cast, if by utopian we mean worldly, possible, attainable, knowable.

I have thus far attempted a dispassionate statement of Professor Said's arguments. I have done so, and at length, because his work does not lend itself to easy summarization. Considered for its literary style, it may charitably be called discursive. In fact it is rambling and woolly. The three chapters of the book are but a wordy recapitulation of the introduction, with the leading ideas not so much amplified as repeated at greater length. As assertion follows assertion, and qualification follows qualification, the reader must feel that he is watching a revolving barber pole, not following an argument. Everything Professor Said thinks of reminds him of something else; put another way, the reader cannot see the mosaic for the stones.

The hand of postmodernist lit-crit jargon hangs heavy over every page: in a splendid example of this embracing of every terminological trend, he calls the film made of Gould playing and talking about the Bach *Goldberg Variations* just one year before his death "an act of closure"; anyone not so with-it intellectually would have simply called it a farewell. Passage after passage must be read several times over to tie clauses together, and even to

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unite verbs with subjects. The fruit of rereading is little more than the reader's awareness that once Professor Said as critic has said the words "domination" and "authority," he has said it all.

Le style est l'homme même—style is the man himself—Buffon told us in the eighteenth century. It is impossible not to feel that Professor Said's stylistic divagations are but the presenting face of his own complicated critical program—though I suppose that after reading his book, I should refer not to his program but to his agenda.

Professor Said cannot allow us to forget that he is a Palestinian Arab living in exile, though exactly why he has chosen this exile—other than to show us the error of our ways—he never states. To convict the hated Zionists, he must drag in Paul de Man, for no other reason than to illustrate the connection between art and life, and as an example of Jewish complicity with the Nazis; similarly, he cannot avoid the temptation to associate Yitzhak Shamir with Adolf Eichmann. So obsessed is Professor Said by the subject of Zionism that even his praise for Marcel Proust as an artist seems suspect, for was not Proust the greatest twentieth-century chronicler of the unassimilability of the Jews, Zionists in spite of themselves, to society?

Professor Said has here really written two books about music, or rather one book about two kinds of music. There is the music he sees—or hears—from outside, and there is the music he plays and loves. The music he experiences from outside is the great music of the repertory, the masterpieces kept alive by virtuoso performance. This music he sees as a part of the European oppression of societies and peoples, both their own and foreign; not only does he reject the appearance of this music in concert, but, following Adorno, he rejects it even more ardently when it is available on recordings.

And yet it finally turns out that Professor Said has a soft spot for even this public music, and for its performers. He is a great admirer of the Beethoven *Eroica*, surely a touchstone of public music; a passage in the Brahms Variations he heard played by Brendel reminds him pleasurably of the noble "Nimrod" variation in the *Enigma Variations*, the most famous work by the arch-imperialist Edward Elgar. It is true that Professor Said has kind words for the music of the French Catholic and musical modernist Olivier Messiaen, as he has for the Jewish political radical Frederic Rzewski's Variations on the Chilean workers' song "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!" But in fact, his taste, to judge by the music he discusses at length, is foursquare and safe; like every other music lover these days, he likes Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Wagner, Brahms, and Richard Strauss, most of them German, and all safely situated in the dominative and hegemonic Eurocentric canon.

Looked at in this way, Professor Said's second kind of music—the variation writing he admires so much in Beethoven and Brahms—seems only a special case of the public music from which he affects to keep his distance. For Professor Said's private music, intimate, contemplative, and speaking to the individual, is but an offshoot of the truly dominating structures in Western music: harmony and counterpoint. It is these structures, with all their explicit rules and accepted, though no less formative, conventions that make possible both the sonata form Professor Said finds dominative and the variation form he finds so privately appealing.

It is tempting to see in Professor Said a frustrated concert pianist, a man who but for the grace of God would be traveling around the world from concert hall to concert hall and recording studio to recording studio. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing from Professor Said's writing, despite his many words about his Polish-Jewish piano teacher in Cairo, at just what level of proficiency he actually plays; what is clear is that in his enthusiasm for going home after the Brendel recital to try the Brahms piece for himself, just as in his comment at the beginning of this book that it is *playing* the music that gives him the greatest pleasure, he has identified himself as someone hopelessly hooked on making music for himself.

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We should make no mistake about it: making music for oneself, and not relying solely on the work of others in concerts and recordings for musical experience, is good and praiseworthy. What one learns about the music as one plays it, or attempts to play it, is invaluable. It is also true that this ability seems to be dying out as modern life values such a normative cultural pursuit as great music ever less. There can be no doubt that Professor Said, unlike so many who write about music, actually loves the art and is willing to give up a major portion of his life to his pursuit.

It is difficult indeed to quarrel with Professor Said's preference for experiencing great music as a private pleasure. It has been clear for many years now that true music lovers —those who are interested in music, not in glamour—are increasingly leaving the world of public concerts. However, they are only to a limited extent going back to Professor Said's desideratum of making the music for themselves; instead, they are ever more relying on cheap, technologically satisfactory, and virtually indestructible recordings. The reasons for this flight from the public sphere are many, and difficult to weigh. They include the enormous number of possibilities, provided by the late capitalism Professor Said finds so repellent, for the employment of leisure time; the lack of a solid educational background in the greatest materials of Western civilization, among them music; the overwhelming competition, and the resulting corruption of taste, high culture faces from popular culture. Perhaps this situation can be summed up by saying that we are facing a triumph of markets, not just in the production of economically useful goods but in the provision of culture as well. People the world over now know that it is possible for them to get what they want, and that they need no longer accept what a once-dominating elite thinks is good for them. Thus the musical woes Professor Said describes as being caused by patterns of domination and hegemony are actually the result of system-wide breakdowns in such domination and hegemony.

Furthermore, the praiseworthiness of Professor Said's commitment to music should not blind us to the fact that in his approach to the body of musical masterworks, he has pulled off a neat trick. It is not too much to say that he has found quite an ingenious way to kill his music and have it too, to attack its social and cultural basis politically and intellectually, and then to cherish it in his private hours of self-contemplation.

It is all very well to inveigh, as he so often does, against virtuosos for distancing the audience from the music through the dominative—there's that word again—force of their performances. But all the composers whom Professor Said admires were virtuosos: Bach was a virtuoso organist and harpsichordist, Mozart was a virtuoso harpsichordist and fortepianist, Beethoven, Chopin, and Brahms were virtuoso pianists, and Wagner and Strauss were virtuoso conductors. The music of all these geniuses was written by them in the knowledge of their own great talents as executants; their greatest music was not written for amateurs, but for themselves or for virtuosos like themselves.

Even more, the sad fact is that the music Professor Said loves exists (as he must know) only as a development inseparably tied to modern European history, in all its religious, economic, and social triumphs. That there exists a music for Professor Said to write about, and a music whose fate Professor Said can bewail, is owing to the cultural matrix Professor Said resists and undermines in so many intellectual and political ways. In this, his attempt to question for others what he cleaves to himself, Professor Said is only replicating the course of his eminent academic colleagues in their literary and cultural studies of the classics; like them, he knows the great works, and spends his time with them, in literature as in music. If the price of being allowed such a closeness to masterpieces is that they be destroyed for students, well, that's just the way the cookies of scholarship crumble.

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Delacroix at the Met

by Karen Wilkin

In 1963, traveling as students used to during the summer vacation, I found myself in Paris in time for the large exhibition organized by the Louvre to commemorate the centennial of the death of Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). I am sorry to report that this can be described only as a Significant Waste. As an art-history major, I dutifully visited the show, but I simply wasn't up to it. I was too young, too ignorant, too uninformed to deal with all that Romantic intensity. It seemed excessive, faintly embarrassing. My favorite Old Masters, at the time, were Uccello and Piero della Francesca, although I also harbored a remarkable enthusiasm for de Kooning in his *Pink Angels* phase; some things you outgrow. I hadn't seen enough, lived long enough, or looked hard enough at enough art to make the kind of associations Delacroix demands. Unable to grasp what he had to say about the tradition of Western painting, indeed about painting itself, I got bogged down in the theatricality and the flamboyance and missed the point. And the intense color I expected from what I had read about Delacroix and from his *Journals* simply wasn't visible through the yellowed varnish of the large-format pictures, in the Louvre's mediocre lighting. (I remember going off to look at that spooky, over-sized fifteenth-century icon, the *Pieta of Villeneuve-les-Avignon*, after the Delacroix show, as an antidote.)

It wasn't until some years later that I began to discover just what Delacroix (and Géricault, for that matter) were about and to regret what I had, for all practical purposes, missed in 1963. All of which now makes me head straight for *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and *The Barque of Dante* whenever I am in the Louvre (even though the varnish is even darker and the lighting still mediocre) and makes me grateful for any Delacroix exhibit. Even limited selections can be absorbing and enlightening, as the idiosyncratic mini-shows at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries have proved over the years. Absent any large-scale exhibition of Delacroix in this country, I looked forward to the Metropolitan Museum's spring survey, "Eugène Delacroix: Paintings, Drawings, and Prints from North American Collections."[1] Expectations were necessarily limited, since there are no equivalents in the U.S. of the great works in the Louvre, no *Women of Algiers*, no *Barque of Dante*, no *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios*, no *Liberty Leading the People*, no full-sized *Death of Sardanapalus*. But there are some fine pictures here, so guarded optimism, as the Republicans say, was in order.

I can't say I was disappointed, exactly, since the Metropolitan's exhibit *did* contain

1 "Eugène Delacroix: Paintings, Drawings, and Prints from North American Collections" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on April 10 and remains on view through June 16. A catalogue, with two essays by Lee Johnson, has been been published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art/Harry N. Abrams (213 pages, $39.50; $29.50 paper).

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some first-rate works, including their own splendid *Abduction of Rebecca* (1846), a rousing scene from *Ivanhoe*, looking as fresh and brilliant as it must have looked when it left Delacroix's studio. Outstanding, too, were that glowing jewel, *The Bride of Abydos* (1857, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth) —Byron, this time, instead of Sir Walter Scott, but the same idea—and a haunting *Christ on the Cross* (1846, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore). The Philadelphia Museum of Art's small 1846 version of *The Death of Sardanapalus* was a special treat; made by Delacroix as a substitute for the large canvas he had finally sold, almost twenty years after painting it, the loose, rapid "miniature" was one of the most intimate pictures in the show, a glimpse of the artist painting for himself, allowing red drawing to heat up flesh tones, just as Rubens did, and like Rubens, too, allowing fluent brushstrokes to conjure up extravagant gestures and wild action. The large selection of drawings, watercolors, and prints included many as provocative and revealing as any of the paintings, if not more so. But there were peculiar omissions. Where, for example, were the two fine orientalizing canvases from the collection of the Minneapolis Museum of Art, or their relative from the Norton Simon Museum? Why, having included two versions of *Christ and His Disciples Crossing the Sea of Galilee*, omit the other two in American collections?

And why, since there were so many very good works in the exhibition, was the cumulative effect strangely less compelling than the impact of individual paintings and drawings? I'm still perplexed. The exhibition offered some insight into the taste of American collectors. The modest scale of the paintings and the sheer number of drawings and watercolors even afforded a fairly intimate view of the artist, an image of a private Delacroix, sketching and working out ideas, rather than the acclaimed painter of monumental murals in public places, or large, imposing Salon canvases. But the show seemed to prepare us for something it didn't—and couldn't—deliver. "Eugène Delacroix: Paintings, Drawings, and Prints from North American Collections" would have been an excellent introduction to a more ambitious exhibition, one that would have included examples of the public, as well as the private, artist. It is extremely unlikely that any such show could be assembled outside France, but knowing that didn't make the Metropolitan's effort any more satisfying. It was a little frustrating, a bit of a tease; I won't say there was no climax, but there was an awful lot of foreplay.

What the show provided most abundantly was a sense of Delacroix's evolution. That is, it did if you knew what you were looking at, since only the label for the Metropolitan's 1828 sketchbook stated the year the work was made; the rest were inexplicably dateless. Chronology apart, the breadth of Delacroix's reach and the variousness of his approach were evident, particularly in the drawings. Throughout his lifetime, he kept trying things out, searching for subjects that would fully engage him, motifs that would galvanize his energy and his imagination, ways of working that would translate deep feelings into paint. (His *Journals* are full of exhortations to himself to work more and read more, to find inspiration.) The early sketchbook, with its pencil drawings and watercolors mostly of the landscape and townscape near Tours, along with drawings after works of art that the young painter admired, helped to enlarge our view of his self-education. A vivid pastel sunset and an oil sketch of a hillside offered evidence of a Delacroix who studied transient natural phenomena in a way that recalls Constable. (But where were the canvases that would have made the connection explicit?) Drawings, watercolors, and even prints done during and after his 1832 trip to Morocco, apparently inspired equally by his experience of North Africa and his liking for Rubens, pointed toward what the mature artist could be at his best. A suite of prints of *Hamlet* from 1834, paired with their preparatory drawings, made for interesting comparisons, although the images themselves, amazingly like illustrations for a boys' adventure story of the period, were persuasive arguments

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against nineteenth-century performance practice. My favorite: "The Death of Hamlet," with the prince expiring decoratively in Horatio's arms, downstage, Laertes lugged out by three retainers, with a nod at the Raphael *Entombment* in the Villa Borghese, and Gertrude dying on the left, just managing to get her head into the picture.

The catalogue's two essays, both by the English Delacroix scholar Lee Johnson, provide a portrait of the man, drawn largely from the comments of his contemporaries and peers and from his own statements, and a discussion of his work, his career, and reception in the United States. The latter essay, "The Art of Delacroix," makes it clear that the exhibition's emphasis on the artist's education, evolution, and process, particularly as documented by the drawings, was not merely a function of what was available from North American holdings, but a deliberate effort to clarify how Delacroix is perceived. I'm not sure how much of a problem this is for twentieth-century eyes, accustomed to expressive distortions and anatomical wrenchings for the sake of heightened emotion, but Johnson is evidently troubled by how frequently critics in Delacroix's lifetime faulted him for clumsy drawing and for disregarding the rules of academic composition. (This didn't prevent his achieving immense fame and receiving an extraordinary number of commissions to decorate important public buildings.) Johnson stresses that the evidence of Delacroix's work gives the lie to this contemporary criticism; the drawings and watercolors are proof that he made careful preparations for his paintings, that he studied the past, and that, in spite of his statements about the advantages of working from the imagination, he did his homework. Witness the exhibition's renderings of antique coins and medals, the copies of Old Master works, the careful studies from life, the experiments with compositional stratagems. Nineteenth-century critics, it seems, judged Delacroix wrongly.

Yet if they were applying the standards of the glacial neoclassicism of the first part of their century, you can't blame them. Delacroix simply wasn't interested in the kind of geometric order, balance, and clarity prescribed by the Academy. He preferred to sacrifice rational harmony for less predictable ways of organizing a picture and preferred, often, to sacrifice finish for the appearance of inspired conception and rapid execution. (In his *Journals*, he worried about why his sketches seemed better to him than his finished work and concluded that it was because the sketch left so much to the imagination, to be completed mentally by the viewer.) If Delacroix had wanted to draw like David or Ingres, he probably wouldn't have been able to. He had a heavy hand and his figures, whether drawn from life or simplified by memory, are a little chunky and schematic, no matter how lively their actions, how vigorous their gestures. But it seems plain that Delacroix never aspired to the standards of classical antiquity, not even to classical antiquity filtered through the Renaissance. As Johnson documents in his essay "Portrait of Delacroix," the quintessential Romantic "painterly" painter respected classicism, respected David and even his "official" opponent, Ingres, but he had no desire to work as they did. His heroes were not Raphael and the Greeks and Romans, but Rubens and Rubens's own mentors, the Venetians.

Like them, Delacroix appears to have thought not in terms of outlines and modeling, but in terms of masses of color, light, and color-drenched shadow. The forms in his drawings often seem to be waiting for tone and color to articulate them fully or situate them in space. Even in the early sketchbook, with its complicated roofscapes and architectural details, complex events are signaled by intricate patchworks of tone, not by careful delineation. The bare muscles of his scrupulously observed écorchés are treated as blocks of hatching that all but point the way to Cézanne. When Delacroix strove for more finish and more conventional ways of rendering form, his drawing (or painting) could go slack. The labored illustrations of *Hamlet* testify to this, as does the Metropolitan's recent acquisition *The Natchez* (1835), a

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slightly cloying idyll, with slippery figures and uncharacteristically tight contours. When he worked to the demands of the heroically scaled Salon "machine," this was also likely to happen. On the other hand, when Delacroix's paintings have the directness and immediacy of his drawings, as in such small-scale works as *The Abduction of Rebecca* or the small version of *The Death of Sardanapalus*, they can be dazzling.

Delacroix's drawing was certainly adequate to his needs. He had a robust, workman-like facility—none of the inspired left-handedness of Cézanne—but he seems to have been impatient with what line and even tone would permit, as though he conceived his images from the start in vivid polychromy. Paintings like *The Abduction of Rebecca* and *The Bride of Abydos* demonstrate how much his best works depend on light and color (and often, on his urgent touch) for their energy and, to a great extent, their drama. In the *Abduction*, violence and confusion are more effectively communicated by the contrast of a dappled, silvery haunch, a fluttering golden tail, and a sharp-edged red saddle blanket on the horse that bears the swooning Rebecca, than by anything else in the picture. The way the deep blue of Rebecca's skirt sinks back into the center of the picture suggests action more than the rather ineffectual gestures of her abductors do; the frayed-off strokes of the horse's mane add speed and energy. As sheer *painting*, it's all so good that it makes you overlook the preposterous pose of the standing figure, who seems to be facing in as many directions at once as any of Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon.

In the same way, in *The Bride of Abydos*, restless color shifts, from blue to violet to blue-green to alizarin crimson, add motion to the hapless young woman's garments and suggest struggle more than her nearly acquiescent pose does; the crisp russet and white of her captor's costume, like the clear arc of his sword above her floating draperies, heightens the effect. That Delacroix was capable of this almost from the start could be seen in *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* (Art Institute of Chicago), painted in 1826, when he was twenty-eight. Byron in his orientalizing mood is once again the source. The palette is atypically cool, all silvery opalescent grays and luminous warm whites. The ferocity of the battle between the Turk and the Venetian is suggested chiefly by the way pale, intense color sweeps across the center of the canvas, cascading from figure to figure, linking the adversaries. Disjunctions of dark and light make the combat seem even more fierce as Delacroix, typically, tears light and shadow away from the description of the three-dimensional and forces them, instead, to amalgamate or dissolve forms.

This play of radiant shadow and dramatizing light is part of what Delacroix learned from Rubens, of course. Rubens's own sources, Titian and Veronese, also served as models for Delacroix, in some ways even more than Rubens did. (The impact of Veronese's superhuman *Marriage at Cana*, a fairly recent arrival in Paris, thanks to Napoleon, must have been overwhelming.) If Delacroix shared with Rubens a taste for scenes of dramatic action, violence, and the exotic—mounted warriors locked in combat, wild beasts tearing each other apart, and the like—he shared with the Venetians something even more fundamental to his art: a passion for richly orchestrated, saturated color. Delacroix's mineral palette, with its varied reds, crimsons, violets, and blues, set off by gold and malachite green, is far more Italian than French. The opaque, zingy cadmium red that Delacroix was so fond of setting against warm browns and cool blue-greens stands out as much because of its otherness from the rest of his transparent palette as because of its brightness. (It's an odd color, as startling when it turns up in nature on a blazing lily as when Delacroix uses it to isolate a figure in a foundering rowboat on the Sea of Galilee.)

It's slightly more difficult to find direct precedents closer to Delacroix's own French heritage. Chardin comes to mind, for the warmth and subtlety of his color, the sturdy sensuality of his paint handling, and the way he makes light pour over the everyday

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objects of his still lifes, but no sensibility could be further from Delacroix's. Chardin celebrated the insignificant, while Delacroix was irresistibly attracted to the histrionic. Watteau may offer a closer parallel. His groups of elegantly clad lovers, pursuing amusement under a golden autumnal light, his agile *commedia dell'arte* characters, and above all, the sheer *artifice* of his world of parks and gardens, all have echoes in Delacroix's imagery. Most of Delacroix's themes, after all, were taken not from observed actuality but from the literature of the past and the period: Shakespeare, Goethe, Byron, Sir Walter Scott, and even Chateaubriand, with his amazing ideas about the native American population. The events Delacroix depicted were either imaginary or remote in time or place, with the exception of *Liberty Leading the People*, uniquely inspired by a current local event, albeit presented in the guise of allegory, not reportage. (Delacroix's biblical subjects were usually commissioned works.)

There's something a little sanitized and, well, romanticized about how Delacroix conceives even the most dramatic of events. In *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan*, no blows have yet been struck and the crouching figure about to hamstring the horse has not yet acted; real violence is imminent, but not depicted. Beasts attack and devour their prey, including the occasional human, with a minimum of gore. Among the exhibition's prints are a lion who chows down on what appears to be a sheep-size rabbit and a tiger who looks like a cross between an agitated housecat and a badly folded rug, neither of which inspires much awe. Arabs brandish fearsome weapons but die elegantly, in noble poses, limbs intact. Only the crucified Christ bleeds abundantly, although I couldn't help wondering if this weren't simply to provide Delacroix with an excuse to set touches of red against the luminous white of the body. Of course, the whole of the immense canvas *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios* turns on the gleaming thighs of the nearly naked wounded man in the center, a hint of the sensual in the midst of misery and carnage, but I suspect that if the picture were cleaner, the expanse of rosy sky would change the balance.

Even Delacroix's abductions are relatively decorous. Rebecca is fully clad, and while she displays her magnificent corsage, her modesty is in no way disturbed by the way her two captors hold her; her skirt stays *down*. Think about Rubens's frankly sexy *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* (1616-17, Alte Pinakothek, Munich) by way of contrast. It clearly provides some kind of precedent for *The Abduction of Rebecca*, with the two men, one mounted, one standing, grappling with their female prizes, and the plunging horse angling into the canvas. But where Rubens concentrated on the struggling nude bodies of the two ample young women, contrasting them with their robust attackers the way Veronese, earlier, had contrasted naked female flesh and chilly armor, Delacroix used the abduction theme as an excuse to juxtapose horseflesh and figures, exotic costumes and brilliant colors. Delacroix's sensuality is more intellectual, more about the physicality of paint and the raw materials of painting than it is about suggestive subject. His fascination with the remote and the exotic, with the literary, the theatrical, and the fantastic (his political views apart), make Delacroix's paintings seem very much of their times, as indeed they are. But his fascination with the stuff of painting, the very thing that set him apart from his rival, Ingres, and makes him the paragon of painterly painters, can make him look surprisingly modern. It was possible to see this in the best of the pictures in the Metropolitan's selection. It's evident in the way paint is applied in a late work like *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* (1863, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). Here paint is not so much stroked on as pressed into the surface, with the dense loading of the foreground made even more striking by the loose, atmospheric handling of the background.

What the Metropolitan's exhibition failed to make visible was the difference between the intimate and the public-scale painter. It failed to show us either how much Delacroix

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sometimes gained from working large or how many problems large formats could pose for him. Big expanses and large-scale figures could free him, loosen his touch, and allow him to cultivate the appearance of spontaneity that so pleased him in his sketches, without sacrificing firm structure; witness the solid, broadly painted figures in *Liberty Leading the People*. Large formats allowed him to indulge his taste for lavish detail without becoming fussy (although he could certainly do this mid-size, as well). Most of all, the grandiose formats of pictures like the Louvre's *Death of Sardanapalus*, *Constantinople Taken by the Crusaders*, or *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios* allowed Delacroix to measure himself against the standards of the Salon, to compete with "official" art, test himself publicly. Sometimes, he triumphed; sometimes, he got too careful, too concerned with finish. But for this aspect of the painter, you have to go to Paris.

Not by calculation, but by chance and good fortune, a current research project took me there shortly after I had seen the Metropolitan show several times. It turned out to be an ideal preparation for a return engagement with the remarkable array of Delacroix in the Louvre and made me see old favorites and old acquaintances with new eyes. For once, with the memory of the Met's luminous *Abduction of Rebecca* freshly in mind, it was possible to imagine what the Louvre's pictures would look like if it were possible to clean them. The color in *Constantinople Taken by the Crusaders*, for example, is orchestrated in ways similar to *Rebecca*, under the darkened varnish, and despite the evident difference in paint handling and the greater formality of structure, it's possible that the vast tour de force once possessed the startling impact of the smaller picture. (They are almost contemporary.)

The installation at the Louvre allows us to compare Delacroix with some of the painters who set the standards he strove to challenge, and his originality becomes manifest. *Constantinople* and *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios* hang within striking distance of an immense effort by the Baron Gros, painted a generation earlier, of Napoleon visiting the plague victims of Jaffa. For all its exotic, orientalizing (and creepy) subject matter, the painting has the rigidity and compression of a classical relief. By comparison, Delacroix's figures seem extraordinarily mobile, set free in all directions. Even the dead and dying women in the foreground of each of Delacroix's pictures occupy space more aggressively, with their sagging heads and taut necks, than Gros's Greco-Roman male figures. On the rare occasions when Delacroix consciously constructs a painting within a geometric framework, as he does in *Liberty Leading the People*, which is as classical as he ever gets, there's a sense of air, of possibility of movement, of space inhabited. It results, more often than not, from the independent play of light and shadow, and the pulse of color (however obscured) typical of even Delacroix's most carefully studied, most cautious efforts. In *Liberty Leading the People*, paint-handling is unusually broad, much to the picture's benefit, but the contrast of blues and ochers, flesh tones and warm darks, probably has more to do with the painting's vigor and sense of amplitude than the way it is painted.

Liberty Leading the People benefits, too, from being hung in fairly close proximity to Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, similarly pyramidal in structure, but with everything moving into the picture, away from the spectator. Did Delacroix consciously invert his friend's masterpiece when he came to paint his homage to the barricades, substituting clothed bodies for nudes, energy for lassitude, action for despair, broad strokes for elegant glazes, and a plunge toward the viewer for a thrust toward the horizon? The calm geometry of *Liberty Leading the People* is almost unique among Delacroix's compositions. The unstable structure of *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios* is more characteristic, although it is a very odd painting indeed, with its uncomfortable piles of bodies pressed to the edges of the canvas and its slightly incomprehensible distant view slicing through the middle, sucking you simultaneously deep into the picture and out of

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the zone of greatest incident. The tipped chaos of *Sardanapalus*—less good full-sized than in the rapid copy shown at the Met—is equally peculiar and, in some ways, equally typical because it's so peculiar.

In the end, it's not the big machines of Delacroix that impress the most, but the more intimate mid-sized pictures: *Women of Algiers*, or the smaller *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* with its palpable light, its blurred figures, and its snappy red railings. *Women of Algiers* teeters on the brink of overloading. Delacroix revels in details of costume and setting, jewelry, fabric patterns, tilework. But the picture can stand it, somehow. The scale is absolutely right—approximately life-sized, not larger than life—which gives Delacroix room for anecdote and still allows him to tie it all together, casually, with color and light. Light washes over the figures, setting up its own rhythms, regardless of the conventional importance of what is revealed. It falls on a hand, an ankle, the bridge of a nose, the stripes of a garment. Even with the modifying varnish and the flat gray light of Paris, the pervasive warmth of Delacroix's color is apparent; pinks thread through, cadmium reds flash against greens, albeit slightly muddied greens, and a range of unnameable blues intensifies the pinks and roses. Delacroix's touch responds as acutely as his eye. Flesh is smoothly painted, carefully glazed, delicately stroked, while clothing is loose, brushy, and shimmery. (The transparent blouse of the seated woman in the center is a minor miracle.) Oddly, *Women of Algiers* criticizes most of the orientalizing pictures in the Metropolitan's exhibition, as well as those in the Louvre. Its virtuoso assembly of patterns and its subtle play of light and color transcend nineteenth-century orientalism, with its taste for the exotic, its pleasure in the *idea* of the remote and the foreign. It points, instead, to the deep sympathy for the most fundamental characteristics of the art and design of North Africa that pervades Matisse's work, the sympathy that has been called "orientality."

I suppose that saying that my perceptions of these familiar paintings in the Louvre were altered by having seen the Metropolitan's show amounts to an endorsement of the exhibition, for all its limitations and omissions. (To be sure, the phenomenon worked both ways; the Louvre's enchanting *Young Tiger Playing with His Mother* made those two *animalier* prints at the Met seem even sillier.) But filtering the Louvre's Delacroix holdings through a recent memory of the Metropolitan's show also made me wish more than ever that I could see that "lost" exhibition of 1963 with my 1991 eyes. And it made me wish more than ever that the Louvre's paintings were cleanable. Of course, the bicentennial of Delacroix's birth is coming up in 1998 and that no longer seems as implausible a date as it once did —say in 1963. Something to look forward to.

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The Luther of science?

by Bruce Bawer

At his best, Evan S. Connell is a literary alchemist, turning commonplace elements into gold. In *Mrs. Bridge* (1959) and its sequel, *Mr. Bridge* (1969)—two of the finest American novels to appear since the Second World War—he captivatingly chronicles the married lives of an upper-middle-class Kansas City couple based on his parents. One might describe these novels, set mostly during the 1930s, as studies in orthodoxy, for Walter and India Bridge are essentially sober, sensible, and practical-minded bourgeois gentlefolk to whom the defiance of social convention is virtually equivalent to an infraction of moral law—people who, despite their occasional moments of passion or transcendence, and their real (if rudimentary) curiosity about people and places beyond their ken, cannot conceive of an existence not founded firmly on Middle-American Protestant values. (As we learn on the opening page of the 1969 novel, Mr. Bridge decides early on that he is "an attorney rather than a poet" and should "never pretend to be what he was not.") The Bridges, in short, lead supremely ordinary lives, he as a lawyer, she as a housewife; but out of these ordinary lives Connell creates something of extraordinary beauty, his severely plain and unpretentious—though consistently graceful—prose exerting a remarkable poetic force. He is no Steinbeck or Saroyan, sentimentally forcing meaning upon his characters' lives and putting implausibly poetic words in their mouths; nor is he an Ann Beattie, wearing one down with meaningless catalogues of household items and reams of vapid chatter.

Rather, by means of a succession of sensitive, deceptively simple realistic strokes, Connell captures the very texture of human existence, with its moments of alienation and communion, disappointment and triumph, spiritual limitation and exultation, loss and joy. Though plotless and devoid of high drama, the chapters brief and almost snapshot-like in their focus on discrete (and often seemingly unrelated) incidents, the Bridge novels are astonishingly moving, their protagonists engaging one's imagination and affection almost from the very start, their quiet epiphanies reminding us of the preciousness of everything human, their characters' keenly rendered voices and gestures and reflections drawing us irresistibly to them as if they were real. As with one's own family and friends, one sees the Bridges at their worst and yet feels great tenderness toward them; at various points one finds oneself at once touched and amused, or compassionate and exasperated, as one rarely does with even the most convincing fictional characters but routinely does with real-life loved ones. So delicate is Connell's phrasing that the gentlest grace note—the most unspectacular expression of generally stifled love or inquisitiveness on the part of one of his characters—can prove exquisitely touching. One comes away from these books with an acute awareness that even the most earthbound souls may be morally, emotionally, and intel-

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lectually quite complex—may, in fact, be battlegrounds on which love, habit, responsibility, and a fear of the unknown struggle to suppress an attraction to the exotic, the beautiful, and the divine—and with the conviction that perhaps Connell's greatest achievement, in these two volumes, is to have confronted successfully one of literature's most formidable challenges: namely, to delineate, in convincing and compelling fashion, the progress of an apparently unremarkable person through an apparently unremarkable life.

Given that *Mrs. Bridge* and *Mr. Bridge* represent this rarest kind of achievement, it might seem more than passing strange that in his newest work, *The Alchymist's Journal*,[1] Connell has managed to take one of the most remarkable characters in history—the outrageous sixteenth-century Swiss alchemist, mystic, and physician Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, a.k.a. Paracelsus, about whom it would appear to be all but impossible to write an uninteresting book—and to weave around his bizarre life and legend a novel so monotonous, so bereft of dramatic action and human interest, and so clotted with abstract and esoteric vocables that it is well-nigh unreadable. Such a turn of events might seem strange, I say, but for the fact that the exceptionally gifted Connell has always been the sort of writer who, rather than produce admirable work in a single mode and collect a nice batch of admiring reviews every couple of years (à la, say, David Plante), continues to experiment, every so often trying something new and extreme that is as likely to bemuse the greater literary public as to delight his small body of fervent devotees. Aside from the Bridge novels, for instance, Connell's fifteen books include the peculiar *Diary of a Rapist* (1966), which might be described as a more accomplished precursor of *American Psycho*; *The Connoisseur* (1974) and *Double Honeymoon* (1976), a pair of mild-mannered novels about a quiet New York widower named Karl Muhlbach who might pass for a cousin of Walter Bridge's; *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel* (1963) and *Points for a Compass Rose* (1974), two eccentric free-verse compilations of apothegms, statistics, legends, and historical anecdotes concerned largely with man's inhumanity to man and his perplexing relationship with God; and the celebrated *Son of the Morning Star* (1984), an idiosyncratic study of George Armstrong Custer.

In style and tone, these and Connell's other books vary widely, from the intense intellectuality of the free-verse excursions to the plain, dispassionate particularity of the Bridge novels to the perfervid ornateness of *The Alchymist's Journal*. Structurally, the books tend to be fragmentary, often taking the form of notes, vignettes, or diary entries, as if to suggest that the contradictions and complexities of a life and mind (whether those of a wholly imaginary character, a historical figure, or the author) are best conveyed not by setting forth a traditional coherent narrative but by setting down, without any attempt at transition, certain key ideas, encounters, observations, and moments of illumination. (Reading Connell's books—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry alike—one is frequently reminded of Pound's *Cantos*.) Thematically, the books all reflect to some degree his interest in certain fundamental dualities: conformity and iconoclasm, meekness and willfulness, matter and spirit. If the Bridges are not the only material-minded, self-abnegating, convention-bound characters in Connell's oeuvre, so Paracelsus is merely one of several notoriously willful, individualistic, spirit-driven types—among them the fabled medieval ruler Prester John, the American adventurer Richard Halliburton, and the ancient Greek explorer Pytheas—whose names, plucked from the pages of myth and history, recur in Connell's work as symbols of the seeker, notably in his collection of biographical essays *A Long Desire* (the last piece in which is entitled "Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus Ab Hohenheim & Co.").

1 *The Alchymist's Journal*, by Evan S. Connell; North Point Press, 214 pages, $19.95.

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All these men were reckless, uncompromising, egomaniacal, and more than a little mad, all refused to follow the path of least resistance, and all (as Tennyson might have said) were "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Though Connell acknowledges ignorance, conceit, and ruthlessness where he sees them, he nonetheless admires these men profoundly, for in their very insistence on exploring the unknown—their "long desire"—he finds deep spiritual meaning. (His frequent wordplay about the knower and the thing known recalls Wallace Stevens.) He doesn't seem to care whether these men really existed (indeed, he's fascinated by such unverifiable legends as that of Atlantis), nor—as is demonstrated by his interest in alchemy and other discredited systems of thought—is he overly concerned with the ultimate truth of these seekers' ideas or the wisdom of their procedures. (Nor does their virtue or lack thereof interest him overmuch: in *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*, he says of Paracelsus that "there have / been better men, there have been worse.") No, what matters to him is their devotion to their quests: when he writes of Paracelsus, in *Points for a Compass Rose*, that his "style, / for what it's worth, betrays a disturbed conscience / harried and reckless in its search for salvation," his tone reflects not a disdain for that recklessness but a reverence for the monomaniacal zeal that made the recklessness inevitable. "Certain men," Connell writes later in the same volume,

> contribute factual bits of knowledge
> to the whole and others invent techniques
> facilitating our mastery of the universe;
> but there are others that struggle with truth
> too early, before understanding has ripened
> or burst into the fruits of formulation.
> Such men always lust after the fullest truth
> when it would be much easier to compromise;
> they would rather be mistaken in their search
> than be correct without anguish. Good, I say.
> *Qui vit sans folie n'est pas si sage qu'il croit.*

"He who lives without madness is not as wise as he thinks." It is not, in short, the sane, careful Curies and Pasteurs, with their valuable breakthroughs, who most fascinate Connell, but the impatient, obsessive mystics whose craving for insight into the universe makes them behave in frantic and imprudent ways.

"Mysteries," Connell has written, "attract us more than intelligible facts." And alchemy, without question, is far more a matter of mysteries than of intelligible facts. It fascinates Connell, who refers in *Points for a Compass Rose* to the "miracle of alchemy, / whose apparent purpose—the transmutation / of metal—is of less concern to adepts / than the transmutation of a human soul." Though we in the twentieth century are accustomed to thinking of alchemy as a materialistic pseudo-science whose aim was to change base metals into gold, its practitioners also sought a universal cure for illness and a means to immortality, and Paracelsus and his supporters (who dubbed him "the Luther of science") saw it as a religious pursuit, a means of inquiry into the universe's fundamental mysteries. They regarded themselves as members of a priesthood, and God Himself as the ultimate alchemist, whose creation's organizing principles they aspired to comprehend; thus Paracelsus and the six anonymous alchemists whose journals form the seven chapters of Connell's novel (a more accurate title for which would be *The Alchymists' Journals*) distinguish between "reverent initiates" who recognize alchemy as a sacred calling ("a mystic rose—a petal of the cosmic flower") and "greedy fools" who simply want gold. They defend the possibility of lead's transmutation into gold by analogy to natural phenomena: nature, they note, teems with instances of miraculous transformation—caterpillars into butterflies, trees into stone—so why shouldn't lead become gold? (As one of Connell's alchemists remarks, "wise nature labors upward to consummation"—tends, that is, to turn the imperfect by stages into the perfect.) The more vital analogies, however, are not to natural but to supernatural phenomena—the resurrection, the eucharistic alteration of bread and wine, and the promised spiritual rebirth of those who accept Christ as their personal

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savior. Ultimately, indeed, the alchemists' defense of their vocation is founded upon a Christian apprehension of the oneness of creation (or, as Connell puts it in *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*, "the unicity of matter") and the Christian belief in the transfiguration of body into spirit.

This is not, of course, to compare the man Connell has chosen as his protagonist to Christ. On the contrary, any reader of a biography of Paracelsus—who has been described as "a paranoid, uncouth, abusive, and usually drunken genius"—would find him a highly unpleasant human being. He argued nastily with virtually every accepted medical and scientific authority of his time, scorned accepted doctrines, rejected Renaissance rationalism, and promulgated his own occult, holistic jumble of doctrines, some of them fantastic, some surprisingly prescient (e.g., he anticipated vaccination and asepsis), and some expressed in language so abstruse that no one can make sense of them. Connell does not hesitate to convey Paracelsus's paranoia, abusiveness, and gift for murky parlance in the novel's first chapter; indeed, it seems at times as if the whole chapter is nothing but one long, bemusing, psychotic rant by Paracelsus against his enemies. Here he is, for instance, on page 4:

> Oily saltimbanks! Brangling knaves! Fabulists! Strokers and scrapers with the eyes of bloodletting Saldanian chymists that prescribe a dying man twenty poisons for one. Mewling advocates of Greek sophistry. Red-brindled Hungarian pigs that mistake the Danube for the sea. What confounds them they curse as Beelzebub's work! Curs barking after genius that think to bite my shoe! Hah! What are their names in the street? Sycophants vomiting yellowed lies, sons of cuckolds that grope toward paradise in a milk-maid's crotch. Indentured almond-pickers. . . .

A page later, he is still at it:

> Scabby lechers on rattly shanks, atheists, flea-sprung wits, sons of potters, whoremasters scraped out of sheep, fleering grinning moldy mountebanks, liverish prostitutes hawking greasy nostrums with fingers that twitch and jerk to see a bulging leather purse, servile boasting quacks in shit-stained breeches, malsters, sodomites fornicating upon rear stoops with spaniels or kitchen help. . . . Puppets skipping on a showman's wire with brains delivered to them backward like a clyster, drips from a waning moon, thoughts scattered like nails in a peddler's pack, emptying wormy cups while attending Egyptian athanors, hop-whistling rancid quarreling puking disciples, meat-shop philosophers ignorant of true medicine's requisite—Sapientia! Tetrick bloat-herrings waxed fat with deceit that set up practice among hedgerows from Prague to Geneva and market vermifuge less salubrious than frog guts in a wine glass, all spouting windy proverbs for love of a florin!

And the harangue goes on. Page 6: "Juggling sophists! Catchpoles! . . . Unctuous rakes honing after wonders that neigh toward other men's wives, shanks wet with rot, stout on porridge and mutton and stinking like a goblin's fart. Back-sliders with the elevation and ostent of serpents that would subtract honor from jackals by their presence." Page 8: "Dizzards! Graziers! Chymists swarming through filthy basements! Vermin begot to brew up foul broth! Dung-prophets! Quack-salvers! . . . Thisselwarps! Whifflers! Daubers! Puffers that coagulate, sublimate and distil—tending bubbling apparatus toward what?" Page 9: "Joskins! Drovers fixed at their poison!" Page 11: "Weasels flaunting velvet caps! Dogs trot forth to sniff their vomit! Chickens clustered in a knot provide more nobility, peacocks choked with rage sound less vain and stupid. As if gabbling fraud might rinse their slimy mouths! As if the Holy Ghost of Christian theology should countenance imposture! Lacking skill enough to carve initials on a cherrypit, Cuman asses capering about in lion-skins, ulcerated flatulent druggists with oat-cake faces, three-fingered magicians quick to mulct apoplectic curates—"

And so forth. To be sure, Connell's Paracelsus does not spend all his time castigating

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his adversaries. He tells us, over and over, how great he is ("I hold all secrets of nature . . . by which God endows a great physician"), discusses the greatness of the human heart and mind, the omnipotence of God, and the connections among human illness, the secrets of nature, and the alchemist's art. He makes cryptic assertions: "the martiality of a sickness is enhanced by its aura blossoming from the center yet clinging to its locus." Yet for all his obnoxiousness and obscurantism, Connell is drawn to him by virtue of his emphasis on intuition, his genuine passion to understand the mysteries of the universe, and the courage with which he turns his back on respectability. Connell appears to be particularly intrigued by the notion that Paracelsus was the model for Faust, the symbol "of man's infinite desire for knowledge." (The intended moral of the Faust story, however, does not weigh heavily upon Connell's mind.) If T. S. Eliot celebrated John Donne as the embodiment of the literary era immediately preceding the eighteenth-century separation of thought and feeling, Connell celebrates Paracelsus—who saw man as composed of two forms, the "elemental" (or earthly) and "celestial" (or spiritual)—as the embodiment of the age immediately preceding the scientific revolution's severance of science from religion.

Why, then, has Connell's enthrallment with Paracelsus failed to produce an even remotely enthralling book? One suspects that Connell's enthrallment is itself a big part of the problem: perhaps he has been immersed in Paracelsus for so long that he has failed to recognize that certain exertions might be called for in order to make the alchemist interesting (not to mention intelligible) to the reader. In the event, Paracelsus comes off in the novel's first chapter as a crashing bore, a raving, insanely repetitious streetcorner crank who remains startlingly one-dimensional throughout. The novice alchemist whose journal we read in the book's second chapter refers to "the torrent of his mind," but one might rather speak of the torrent of his pen, for there are far more words here than there are provocative ideas. Nor do the chapters that follow represent much of an improvement: in diction and cadence, his fellow alchemists' voices are too similar to Paracelsus's, and they cover pretty much the same territory. This is, in short, a crushingly tedious book, clogged from beginning to end with sentences so slippery with abstraction that unless the reader picks up each one in its turn very carefully it will skid right out of his hands. (Of Paracelsus, for instance, the novice notes: "He said that we partake of ourselves as one envisaging Gold approximates its essence, or imagining Fire calls up himself toward revenge. And so we are sustained among discrepancies since the probity of our meditations cannot be disregarded." An occasional sentence of this sort would cause no great problems; but Connell goes on like this for pages, and the results are deadening.) The book contains no action; no plot; hardly any sense of movement or development; and remarkably little human interest, contrast, or conflict. None of the seven alchemists flowers in one's imagination into an actual human being, distinct from his fellows and existing apart from the page.

Even readers, moreover, who feel that our own century has placed too much emphasis on objective reality and the scientific method, and too little on the unquantifiable, will have trouble with the idea of Paracelsus—at least, of Connell's Paracelsus—as a spiritual hero. I have noted that Connell plainly admires his subject's passion; but he seems to forget that the finest passion is not necessarily the most loudly proclaimed. Connell cites admiringly, in *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*, Paracelsus's "drive to separate wheat from chaff, wisdom from stupidity"; but surely a myriad of Paracelsus's contemporaries evinced far more wisdom than he did, and separated wheat from chaff more efficiently. And how does Paracelsus's preoccupation with universal harmony square with his inability to get along with anyone else? If there is indeed "unicity" among all people, don't humility, patience, and an ability to listen to others count for anything? Ultimately, whose struggles are more

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dramatically riveting and morally estimable: those of a fanatical rebel like Paracelsus or those of someone who—equally hungry for knowledge and the touch of the divine, and perhaps similarly tempted, therefore, to follow the road of excess—makes use of the rational mind that God gave him and strives to master his overweening passions and to achieve emotional balance? One is not arguing here with Paracelsus, but is merely explaining why Connell's portrait of him is less than electrifying. One can hardly help thinking of the Bridge novels, in which, largely because Connell allows the conventional Bridges to be attracted on occasion by unconventionality, and because his own strong affection for them is counterbalanced by his frankly (and often humorously) critical attitude toward their tastes and temperaments, they emerge as truly rounded characters; here, ironically, Paracelsus's one-note rebelliousness is so unrelieved, and Connell's admiration so uncritical and humorless, that the character remains utterly flat.

That Connell's publishers are all too aware of his new novel's failings would appear to be indicated by their simultaneous publication of a twenty-three-page booklet entitled *A Key to "The Alchymist's Journal."* The booklet may bring to mind Eliot's famous explanatory notes to *The Waste Land*; but whereas those notes recorded the sources of a few stray references and quotations, this extraordinary document is a virtual small-scale Cliff Notes to Connell's novel, providing brief discussions of the history of alchemy, the career of Paracelsus, and the role of alchemy in literature, psychology, and myth; a glossary; a list of sources; and even a couple of tacky, blurbish tributes to Connell's "perfect ventriloquism," to the novel as "a masterpiece," "a work of high, uncompromising art," "a tour-de-force of tonal re-creation," etc. (Which raises the question: is the *Key* by Connell or not? Its cover is ambiguous on this point.) The booklet's manifest purpose would seem to be twofold: (a) to stimulate so much interest in Connell's subject and to praise the novel so lavishly that bookstore browsers will purchase it even though the first few pages look dull, and (b) to help readers through a work that is, frankly, not so much difficult as it is offputting. This is not to deny the novel's difficult aspects: there are scores of obscure words here (though many can be understood from the context) and there are certain important facts that readers might fail to pick up from the novel. (For instance, one has to turn to the *Key* to discover that the six voices following that of Paracelsus are those of, by turns, "a devout novice, an elderly skeptic, a conscientious physician, a Christian historian, a revolutionary, and finally a philosopher.") In any case, many admirers of Connell's best work will doubtless regard the very existence of *A Key to "The Alchymist's Journal"* as a confirmation of their own unhappy judgment that his new novel is, alas, a failed experiment.

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Poems *by Richard Lourie, Walter McDonald & John Drexel*

What have you taught me, Robert Lowell

Between the ball scores and the weather
(Boston slips a game behind, cloudy with a chance of rain)
they give your death one well-enunciated line,
memento mori on Channel Five.

And it did rain in Boston on the first day
of the world without you, the first day
of the New Year of the Jews, my Jews,
of whom I was the first son to speak
that language which was always yours,
though none of us could ever own
that Harvardian Back Bay Virginia drawl
except those among us seeking final hygiene
in Pilgrim wives and studies of *The Faerie Queen*.

The Russian Jews, the steerage Jews, the Chelsea Jews,
blending piety and greed to produce ambition
and the longing to speak perfect English
on which I apparently O.D.'ed.
When I informed my father I would forsake
pharmacy for poetry, we both knew
something broke. The language came between us.
We argued on for years but never really spoke.

—Richard Lourie

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Leaving the middle years

Horse thief or lover,
or merely innocent squatter?
What posse knotted the noose
and tossed it over?

Why shouldn't it be this tree,
grooves in the bark like rope burns?
Imagine a cocked neck bowed,
the hanged man's boots on tip-toe,

fists tied behind him.
Imagine a thousand thieves
swinging the same ballet.
Hear the twist of ropes under tension.

Why shouldn't it be this posse
galloping out of a canyon,
black hats and puffs of pistol shots?
Even from here I know their mounts

are mustangs, able to run
till sundown. They're in no hurry
but coming, five, no six of them
twirling new ropes and shouting.

—*Walter McDonald*

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Homecomings

No magnolias, no cicadas—
nothing but an ordinary evening in Connecticut
when we suddenly recall
the lawns of our imaginary childhood
sweeping down to the nameless river. . . .

These are our voices giving voice
to memories of what we might have wanted to have been—
luxurious houses with great porches
in the hills, places we might have seen
on late summer drives into the country
where anything could happen,
long before we could imagine
wives to live there with us.

* * *

Perhaps this house was built by angels
who had the grace or the presence
of mind or simply the Presence
to go where I once stood, listening to thunder
that echoed to no visible lightning.

Had they been listening? Or singing?

I read in a book of legends
how Ceres goes over the barren fields
at sunrise, sowing grain.

And who are the makers of sunrise?

* * *

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Approaching middle age, more wary,
maybe more deserving if less believing,
we go on believing if we keep on looking
we will surely see the best of what's been made—
as a blind man, listening for the falling leaves of autumn,
considers it a miracle when he discovers,
as if for the first time,
the last recording of some famed contralto.

—John Drexel

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Letter from Paris

Théâtre du printemps

by Renee Winegarten

At the first warmth in the air the Parisian café terraces lie open to the sun, and it is difficult to find a table in Saint-Germain-des-Prés at Les Deux Magots, amusingly self-styled "rendez-vous of the intellectual elite." This establishment has been trading on its past, for scarcely a week goes by without the newspapers telling us that French intellectuals are not what they once were. Wonderful to relate, they stay silent. Worse, they are said to have vanished altogether—an unlikely scenario.

Still, my favorite bookshops survive: La Hune with its wide range of works on art and architecture, and around the corner in the rue Bonaparte the old Le Divan (now a branch of Gallimard), which is perhaps stronger on literature proper. Notwithstanding the pressure of modern traffic, Paris remains the place for the leisurely stroller or *flâneur*. On the trees by the île Saint-Louis, the catkins are beginning to burst. But surely something is not quite right with the temple-like façade of the church of La Madeleine, once dedicated to Napoleon's greater glory. On closer inspection, it is only a theatrical *trompe-l'oeil* canvas, while repairs are proceeding behind it. At night, floodlit, and viewed from the Place de la Concorde, one cannot tell any difference between image and reality.

Changes are afoot. The Tuileries gardens, which have fallen into neglect, are due for immediate restoration under no fewer than nine landscape gardeners and botanists. The work is to be completed in time for the bicentenary of the First Republic in September 1992. The Cognacq-Jay museum, known for its eighteenth-century collections, has moved to the rue Elzévir in the Marais district. The renovated gallery of the Jeu de Paume is about to reopen with a display of contemporary art.

At the Bibliothèque Nationale, an exhibition devoted to the momentous cultural consequences of Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt, and to Jean-François Champollion, the founder of Egyptology and decipherer of hieroglyphics, is drawing long queues. This is not only because of the remarkably refined Egyptian treasures displayed there, but also because of the popular style of the display itself, with actors on video interpreting the words of Champollion and others, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the educational methods long practiced at Williamsburg, Virginia.

I wish I could feel more warmly about the way that some pictures are hung in the Musée d'Orsay, and about the physical impact of the Centre Georges Pompidou. I certainly enjoy looking at what is to be found in these institutions, though, and the wonderful views they each afford over the city. The Musée d'Orsay has been showing the numerous fine acquisitions it has made in the last ten years, in an exhibition called "From Manet to Matisse." The French always seem to be able to devote large funds to the arts (if sometimes to dubious effect). This remark-

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able state of affairs is regarded with astonishment in Britain, where there is endless complaint about inadequate resources and the closures that ensue.

Take the controversial new Bastille Opera House: it was built at great expense to commemorate the bicentenary of the fall of the Bastille and the Revolution of 1789, as well as to enhance the cultural reputation of President Mitterrand (after the manner of Richelieu, Napoleon, and Pompidou). As everyone knows, it opened after a notorious scandal, the summary dismissal of Daniel Barenboim as artistic director, and it has been in trouble off and on ever since. The ostensible aim was to provide opera for the people, and we see what has happened to that! Concerts are being advertised, but operas seem to be few and far between.

I happened to be in Paris when complete performances of Berlioz's mighty work *The Trojans* (of which I am particularly fond) opened at the Opéra de la Bastille. The one I heard fell somewhat short of excellence, despite the large sums evidently lavished on the production. The stage is extremely wide and unhelpful to intimate scenes, the auditorium large, the seats not especially comfortable, and the sightlines in the stalls little better than in a nineteenth-century house. At the same time, the grandiose, elegant, and historically resonant Palais Garnier, once famously the home of opera, is now devoted to ballet alone. It may have the drawbacks of a house that opened in 1875, but what an unnecessary sacrifice! As for the Salle Favart, or Opéra Comique, it remains the place for so-called lighter works like Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*. Meanwhile, yet another venue, the Théâtre du Châtelet, is staking its claim with an adventurous program of operas mixed with concerts and musicals.

For the literary type, one of the great joys of Paris is the theater. A really bad patch in the Seventies followed hard upon André Malraux's sudden dismissal of Jean-Louis Barrault from the historic Théâtre de l'Odéon during the *événements* of 1968 (the great actor-manager claimed that he was given no prior notice). Now, however, the Parisian theater is restored to something like its former self, if not to the glories of the immediate postwar era. What seems missing is the presence of outstanding new French playwrights. Fine actors and actresses abound, but where are the Ionescos, the Anouilhs, the Sartres, or the Montherlants of today? Vain complaint!

What the visitor does find in Paris is an immense choice of plays to be seen not only in the city itself but in its environs. I counted 180 plays in various genres that could be seen in the space of one week. These included numerous translations from English and American, ranging from Shakespeare to *Driving Miss Daisy*, as well as works by Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, and other masters. For a moment, it even seemed as if there were more Shakespeare plays being given in Paris than in London, where the Royal Shakespeare Company has been depressingly absent this winter. In March the RSC at last reopened its doors at the Barbican after four months of darkness, largely due to mismanagement of the (contemporary) repertory, the accumulation of debt (and/or pique at the lack of a rescue operation?).

Of course, one of the leading lights of the postwar period, Ionesco, has never left the Parisian scene. The complete plays of that onetime iconoclast, now a member of the Académie Française, have just been published in the Pléiade edition, the ultimate consecration for a modern author. For umpteen years the Théâtre de la Huchette has been showing absurdist works of his like *La Cantatrice chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*) and the horrid *La Leçon* (*The Lesson*). Not so long ago, there was a deeply moving production of his *Le Roi se meurt* (*Exit the King*) at the Bouffes du Nord, a theater in a state of chic dilapidation under the aegis of the British avant-garde director Peter Brook.

As for the equivocal Jean Anouilh, he appears to be undergoing a revival of sorts. This is scarcely surprising, for whatever may be thought about the intellectual, moral, or political drift of his dramas, he is a supreme master of stagecraft. In London, *The Rehears-*

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al (a version of *La Répétition ou l'amour puni*) has proved so popular that it has transferred from the Almeida, the invaluable small open-stage theater in Islington, to the Garrick, where it is drawing audiences with its blend of style and cynicism. What a relief, after hours spent sitting through the dim works of leftist playwrights like Howard Brenton and Howard Barker, all bent on repeating the tedious cliché of the unique awfulness of British society (tell that to the Romanians!), to find oneself in the company of decadent French aristocrats engaged in the destruction of true love between the self-indulgent Tigre and a poor young governess! Anouilh may be equally meretricious, or wrong-headed (and reactionary), but he is certainly less self-righteous.

An earlier play of Anouilh's is being given at the small but historic Théâtre de l'Oeuvre (scene of the Ibsenite upheaval at the end of the last century). This is *Eurydice* (known in English as *Point of Departure*), in a fine production by Georges Wilson, an actor long associated with the Théâtre National Populaire. First performed in 1942, this play brings with it a strong whiff of the depressingly corrupt ambiance of the Occupation. In Anouilh's reworking of the Orpheus myth, Orphée is a struggling musician who falls in love with a young actress, "stained" by the corruption of her milieu, a mediocre, provincial theatrical troupe. The older generation is represented by Orphée's base, materialistic father (Georges Wilson) and by Eurydice's vulgar actress mother and her companion. The lovers are beautifully portrayed by the touchingly vulnerable Lambert Wilson and the radiant Sophie Marceau.

What ultimately strikes one as offensive, though, is the distinction that Anouilh makes between superior and inferior beings, an element of neo-Nietzschean contempt that vitiates the plays of T. S. Eliot and of Montherlant also. Equally lowering is Orphée's willed choice of self-destruction, after his beloved's death in a car accident. Purity is the myth pursued in Anouilh's drama: this quest remains all the more attractive because such perfection is unlikely to be found in life. For his intransigent personages, ordinary everyday existence inevitably spells the loss of innocence and purity, which are to be recovered only in death. Yet there is no sense of an afterlife; only a feeling of anti-life persists. Anouilh said as little as possible about himself and his plays. The fact that his mother was apparently a violinist at the Arcachon casino perhaps gives some point to the excoriation of artistic mediocrities in *Eurydice*.

By happy chance, it was possible to see two of the major works of French theater this season. The first of these, chronologically speaking, Molière's *Dom Juan*, was being performed at the cavernous Théâtre de Chaillot, scene of the early triumphs of the Théâtre National Populaire of Jean Vilar, himself once a notable exponent of the leading role. Maybe *Dom Juan* is not exactly a good play from a structural point of view, but it is certainly a great one in terms of power and provocation. Its predecessor, Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* (now being brilliantly staged by the RSC in a very free English adaptation called *The Last Days of Don Juan*, in the Pit at the Barbican), is in essence a religious play—the Spanish don being a libertine who repeatedly postpones the moment of repentance. In contrast, Molière's *Dom Juan* appears obliquely as a non-religious and maybe even anti-religious piece. Or is it? The doubt fascinates.

The divines and the right-thinking spectators of 1665 were outraged that the defense of religion and morality was given to Sganarelle, the comic servant (beautifully played by Michel Boujenah). As for the supreme hedonist and atheist himself—a haughty whey-faced aristocrat in the hands of Gerard Desarthe—he confidently anticipates twenty or thirty more years of pleasure and self-regard. Abusing the privileges of rank inherited from worthy ancestors, he has one virtue, courage, but declines into a monster of hypocrisy, a kind of second Tartuffe.

The scene where Dom Juan vainly tempts the decent poor man to blaspheme in return for money, and then throws him a coin "for the love of humanity," never ceases to as-

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tonish in its portrayal of evil as well as in its foretaste of the philosophy of the age to come. How modern is the theme of unredeemed hedonism and spiritual indifference! And, after Dom Juan's descent into hell, what is one to make of Sganarelle's last almost Brechtian cry for his lost wages? Is it a premonition of Brecht's observation that "eating comes first"? One is not only astounded by Molière's daring but touched by his humanity. According to an eyewitness, when at the last Molière was taken seriously ill, he refused to cancel the performance of *Le Malade Imaginaire* because, as actor-manager, he did not want to deprive fifty poor work-people of their livelihood.

Another rare treat is to be found at the Comédie Française, established in 1680, where tradition is religiously preserved (along with the very chair in which Molière is said to have suffered that fatal attack). The manner of performance and the style of production, however, have grown much more free in recent years. The notable treat on offer is Beaumarchais's trilogy, performed there in sequence for the first time in living memory. Two of the plays, *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775) and *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784)—widely familiar in essence through the operas of Rossini and Mozart, respectively—are quite often to be seen on the stage. The third play, *La Mère coupable* (1792), has not been performed for 140 years—since 1850 in fact (though it provided the subject for an opera by Darius Milhaud in 1965).

La Mère coupable has been so long out of favor that Pierre Larthomas, the authority who established the text of the recent volume of Beaumarchais's works in the Pléiade edition, could rashly venture to declare that it probably never would be performed. In the theater, however, *La Mère coupable* led me to liberal use of my handkerchief. The piece just happens to belong to a different genre (along with his earlier neglected dramas) and to a different era from that of the familiar comedies.

This fact was admirably perceived by Charles Péguy. He once wrote of the three plays that they would allow a teacher of history to convey to students the difference in time and the difference of tone that distinguish one eighteenth-century era from the other. They evoke "the very taste, the so-to-speak physical savor of 1775, 1784, 1792," he declared. *Le Barbier de Séville* offers the triumph of gaiety and youth, and is less extraordinary than its sequel, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, where what Beaumarchais called the "strong situations" that arise from "social disparity" are more cogently represented. Here, the undercurrent of opposition to the abuse of privilege has moved from the moral distaste expressed in Molière's *Dom Juan* to the frustration, impotent rage, and insolence of Beaumarchais's Figaro. The scene where the powerful Count Almaviva and his ingenious valet measure each other, privately trying to uncover what is in the other's mind, is a feast of irony. As for Figaro's celebrated monologue, where the valet expatiates upon all the struggles he has undergone to make his way in life, whereas in his view the nobles have only taken the trouble to be born, it still carries a potent charge.

L'Autre Tartuffe ou la Mère coupable, to give it its full title, takes place nearly twenty years on: the Spanish Count and Countess have moved, with their servants Figaro and Suzanne, from Aguas Frescas to the Paris of the Revolution. Ever since she was "surprised" by Léon d'Astorga (the former page Chérubin), the Countess has devoted herself to piety and good works. Her grief at the loss of her honor and her rejection of Chérubin had led him to seek death on the battlefield. The Count suspects that his second son, Léon, is the offspring of Chérubin and the Countess. Young Léon himself, unlike his deceased dissolute elder brother, is a paragon of virtue, a lover of liberty who lectures on current abuses at political gatherings of "patriotes," and he even possesses a bust of Washington. (Beaumarchais, it will be recalled, had played a considerable role in obtaining ships and munitions for the insurgents during the American War of Independence.) High-minded Léon is in love with his father's "ward," Florestine, who is in fact

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the Count's daughter from an extramarital affair.

The plot turns upon the machinations of an Irish machiavel (named Bégearss!) who has contrived to worm his way into all the secrets of the unfortunate family, playing off its members against one another. He is the hypocrite of "virtue"—a resonant word in 1792—who replaces Molière's Tartuffe and Dom Juan, who are hypocrites of religion. Bégearss almost achieves his aim to seize the Almaviva fortune and bigamously marry the "ward," but he is outwitted by the loyal and now surprisingly disinterested Figaro. The piece works well as a moving melodrama that draws much of its secondary interest from the whirligigs of time and the allusions to the spirit or ambiance of the Revolution itself.

Another treat in store, and the success of the hour, is that marvelous machine, Georges Feydeau's *La Dame de Chez Maxim's* (1899), to be found at the Théâtre Marigny (onetime home of the late lamented Renaud-Barrault company). On the evening of the performance I attended there was almost as much farce in the dress circle as on the stage, with no less than three noisy changes of seatholders in one row despite a late start. I must own that I am not a devotee of farce, though I make an exception for Feydeau. No doubt there is something in the claim that he is the greatest writer of farce since Molière. In any event, French farce is to be distinguished from the English variety, for it is much more relentless, faster and tougher, being unlikely to simper over mere naughtiness. It is rarely well performed in English translation, where it tends to look like a soufflé that has failed to rise.

In Feydeau each absurd "disaster" follows fast and furious directly from an original error. Each act of folly has a kind of crazed imaginative logic. A middle-class doctor, Monsieur Petypont, having drunk rather more than is good for him at Maxim's, awakes to find a young cocotte popularly called La môme Crevette (the bubbling Marie-Anne Chazel) in his bed. Who should call at his house that very morning but the General, his uncle from the provinces? The General (to be placated as a potential benefactor) at once assumes that La môme Crevette is his nephew's wife, and he invites the couple to his daughter's wedding in Touraine. At the wedding reception, all the highly respectable ladies of provincial society take to imitating the outrageous words and actions of the supposed Mme Petypont, in the mistaken belief that this is the latest Paris fashion.

The satire of middle-class bigotry and nationalism in the person of the real Mme Petypont, a prude maddened with frustration, the ridiculing of the provincial craze for everything Parisian—these add a savage bite to the farce. Like so many humorists, the handsome and talented Feydeau, supreme boulevardier of the Belle Epoque, was not a happy man. He married the daughter of the painter Carolus Duran, and after the birth of five children he left his wife and family and his fine apartment for good, and stayed thenceforward in a hotel room near the Gare Saint-Lazare. Feydeau died in a clinic in 1921, having lost his mind—a tragic end for one who knew how to inspire such mirth.

In short, Paris still offers what Hemingway once called a moveable feast. True, there may not be much new cuisine, but there is certainly a good deal of excellent solid fare.

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Art

Stuffed

by Jed Perl

On the first warm spring day all the young men of SoHo appeared at Dean & DeLuca's café on Prince Street in generic white T-shirts. A couple of years ago, the T-shirts were black and they were worn with an air of swaggering angst. Now the preferred look is one of squeaky-clean early adolescence. The gallery assistants and artists just out of art school are all impersonating the smooth-cheeked kid next door. With their hair cut to show their ears, these guys look freshly hatched. They cultivate a bit of nerdish gawkiness. This is the new, passive, do-with-me-what-you-will sexiness.

SoHo on a weekday morning is pretty good theater; it's a spontaneous fashion tableau. Only when everybody has finished their cappuccinos does the work of the day begin: turning fashion statements into marketable art. In SoHo, where street style becomes gallery style as fast as you can say "*Artforum*," the boys (and girls) who favor the twelve-year-old look are the same ones who are creating and promoting the new early-adolescent look in art. In the past year or so the galleries have been full of the products that early adolescents think they're too old for (stuffed animals, cartoons) and the things that they want to be old enough for (beer, motorcycles). The entire art scene is backtracking from *Rebel without a Cause* to "Leave It to Beaver"—an X-rated "Leave It to Beaver." The question on everybody's mind is, "What did Beaver do after he turned out the lights?" As a style statement, I find the question amusing. As an artistic statement, I find it fatuous to say the very least.

One of the newer galleries in SoHo, American Fine Arts, is dedicated to early-adolescent sneers. The front desk is kept purposely Slobovian—it's the mess the kid will never clean up. And the shows at American Fine Arts are so casually tossed together—it's often hard to tell if you're seeing the show or the debris that's been left in the gallery between the shows. The I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude is a matter of pride. It's probably an attitude that these young artists picked up in the art schools, where I-don't-give-a-fuck is being presented as the next logical step in the style parade. You stack up your beer cans or hang your dirty stuffed animals on the wall and get an NEA grant. That's a career starter. Then, if you fart loud enough, the distinguished gentlemen of the press will begin to imagine that they're hearing beautiful music.

Mike Kelley, who in the spring of 1990, at Metro Pictures, exhibited slightly soiled stuffed animals on slightly soiled baby blankets, is the latest beneficiary of this process. This spring, the Hirshhorn Museum mounted a small show of his stuffed animals,[1] and Michael Kimmelman, the chief art critic of *The New York Times*, wrote about it in the Sunday "Arts & Leisure" section. "Beneath the stage-managed adolescent comic ex-

1 "Mike Kelley: 'Half a Man'" was on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., from February 20 to May 19, 1991.

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terior," Kimmelman explained, "can be sensed sorrow. This is the strength of the art and its soul. Mr. Kelley is perfectly aware of the treacly, garish quality of the work, and means for it to be considered ridiculous. Hieronymus Bosch is an obvious source of inspiration for his carnivalesque scenarios." This highfalutin commentary on a bunch of dirty stuffed animals is insane; more insane than one can possibly imagine unless one has actually seen a Mike Kelley show. We have no reason to presume that the mainstream press speaks with special intelligence; but we do, no matter what the evidence, tend to believe that the mainstream press is a voice of reason. That's what's so horrifying about Kimmelman on Kelley: the review makes this sniveling opportunist of an art star sound like a reasonable subject to write about.

In the early 1980s, Julian Schnabel and David Salle came on like artsy hip college kids—they wanted to show us how wild and smart they were, how many art-historical illusions they could toss around in their work. The art stars who've appeared in the past couple of years—Jeff Koons, with his polychrome cartoonish statuary, and Mike Kelley, with his stuffed-animal assemblages—often take their imagery from the lives of grade-school and preschool kids. I don't want to overemphasize the difference between the work of these early-Eighties and late-Eighties artists. Basically it's all art-school Dadaism. Schnabel does cut-and-paste jobs with Caravaggio and Kabuki theater, Koons commissions statues of Michael Jackson and the Pink Panther. The artists present imagery, but they don't shape it, and we can't respond. The difference between the heavily hyped products of the early Eighties and the early Nineties might be said to be one of presentation. Schnabel and Salle want to turn their presentations into overwhelming performances—they want to be the Marlon Brando (Schnabel) and the James Dean (Salle) of the art world. Koons and Kelley want to control the art gallery—they want to be Hollywood directors. That Koons is a publicity hound who frequently features himself in his art events doesn't make him any less the director.

Why the subject matter has slipped in the past few years from the concerns of eighteen-year-olds to (sometimes) the concerns of eighteen-month-olds, I can't say for sure. In part it's probably just the wheel of fashion, turning in response to a shift in demographics: baby-boomers are having their own babies. But childhood may have a particular attraction for the poststructuralists, with kids or without. The late-adolescent persona, with its screaming "I," is harder to deconstruct than the young child, who can be made to look, at least by the adult who wants to present a postmodern indictment of our times, like a totally passive, receptive being. In the current downtown mythology, American suburbia is the factory where people are mass produced. Basically, the new view of youth isn't nostalgic, it's sensationalist. Like the TV docudramas about rape and child abuse that pander but claim to fulfill an educational purpose, the artists who use X-rated children's imagery present erotic titillation as the politically correct thing. Frankly, I don't think a lot of these artists know where kiddie porn ends and consciousness-raising begins. And why should they, when an oily opportunist like Jeff Koons is hailed as a genius by people who claim to be intellectuals? All the artists know is that there's an audience that has a taste for this sleazeball stuff.

Eric Fischl was first. He threw the kid into bed with dad, and painted the whole thing in a trash-realist style. Jeff Koons was next. He turned Junior and Sis into porn polychrome garden ornaments. So kiddie porn was already a SoHo staple when Metro Pictures mounted the Mike Kelley show that consisted of stuffed animals arranged on baby blankets in poses that might or might not be X-rated. The difference between Koons and Kelley is a matter of technique, so to speak. Koons, who has his work fabricated at considerable expense, is into investing money in order to make money—he's the happy capitalist. Kelley, who's part of the I-can't-be-bothered-to-put-together-a-show crowd,

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proves that you can invest virtually no money and still make money: as he has explained in interviews, he buys his stuffed animals and crocheted afghans at thrift shops. The Koons show at Metro Pictures gave a gallerygoer pause: presented in that gallery space, it was the most outrageously inconsequential exhibition that I saw last spring in SoHo. But I didn't feel that there was any need to write about it. Dadaist gestures aren't, so far as I'm concerned, newsworthy; and I would rather let somebody else explain that Mike Kelley's crocheted blankets are a kitsch variation on Carl Andre's Minimalist floor pieces.

In the past twelve months, however, Mike Kelley has gone from being regarded as an up-and-coming artist to being regarded as an important artist. It has not hurt his reputation that he has become the subject of NEA controversy. The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston is planning a Kelley show for fall 1992. This past fall, after one of the panels at the National Endowment for the Arts recommended a grant of $40,000 to support the ICA show, John E. Frohnmayer, chairman of the NEA, refused to approve the grant. The art community was up in arms, and though I can't share the community's sense of outrage, I can't say that I support the chairman's actions, either. My feeling is that if one of the NEA peer panels approves a grant for a Kelley show, it is our misfortune that this is what the experts deem significant, but the grant must be given. The NEA was set up to support what the professionals think is serious art, and if the curators of the ICA in Boston and the Hirshhorn in Washington along with the chief art critic of *The New York Times* think that Mike Kelley is worthwhile, so be it. The reversal of peer-panel decisions by the chairman of the NEA does nothing to return aesthetic sanity to the art scene. And, in any event, artists like Mike Kelley know how to make hay out of their conflicts with the NEA. The culture wars have given a considerable boost to artists who exercise their all-American right to freedom of speech to the meretricious raunch hilt.

Mike Kelley's career illustrates a bizarre phenomenon in the contemporary scene. It often seems that the less an artist gives, the more attention an artist gets. I think that our increasingly bureaucratized art establishment likes clever, empty packages. The members of the art establishment can fill these packages with any significance they please. Once the sales pitch is perfected, everything falls into place. The dealers put on astronomical price tags, the critics pontificate about the dirty underside of American life, the museum curators look like heroes because they're fighting for the artists' constitutional rights.

Let me describe a few of the works in the Kelley show at the Hirshhorn. *Arena #11 (Book Bunny)*: a crocheted blanket on which are arranged two cans of different varieties of RAID insect repellent and a stuffed rabbit bent over a book (I think it's a grammar). *Arena # 4 (Zen Garden)*: a crocheted blanket in a brown, yellow, and beige zigzag stripe that is tossed over four lumps (which are, presumably, stuffed animals doing illicit things). *Fruit of Thy Loins*: a wall piece that consists of a giant stuffed bunny to the front of which are sewn a dozen or so other stuffed animals. In the brochure for the show, Amada Cruz, an assistant curator at the Hirshhorn, says that "Mike Kelley's art is confrontational." I can't really see that: I don't feel "confronted" by these dirty stuffed animals, I just don't want to look at them, a different thing entirely. But apparently some people do want to take a long look. And many people who are intelligent enough to know better than to admire this nonsense nevertheless find the phenomenon of Mike Kelley interesting—as a cultural happening, a fashion freak show. What's going on here gives "Go stuff it" unimagined meanings. It has its comic side. And the comedy has its limits. Every time I go to the galleries I see work by many artists who, whether they succeed in what they set out to do or not, are far more deserving of our attention and encouragement than Mike Kelley. And then I think: These artists don't have a chance in a world where everybody's rushing to embrace the X-rated bunnies.

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Fool's gold: Sigmar Polke & the alchemy of critics

by Eric Gibson

Anyone looking for material to include in a time capsule of the 1980s will want to consider the catalogue of the Sigmar Polke retrospective. This show, comprising some one hundred works by the contemporary German painter, was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it opened last November before traveling to Washington, D.C. Both the show and its deluxe four-color catalogue were the brainchild of John Caldwell, curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA, and together they epitomize certain trends in the art world of the last decade.[1]

Of the catalogue's six essays, only one, Katharina Schmidt's on Polke's drawings, makes any serious attempt to analyze and evaluate the artist's work—that is, to do what catalogue essays are supposed to do. The others are mere exercises in public relations, some of them highly extravagant.

None is more extravagant than the one by the show's curator. Mr. Caldwell's essay, the keynote of the catalogue, is a classic of its kind, an abject surrender to the standard clichés about "great" artists. Chief among these are the notions that Polke's artistic achievement is so radical, so profound as to break decisively with the continuum of modern art history; that his work is free from any of the established conventions of artistic language or style; and that his achievement has written the final chapter to the very tradition of art history from which he ostensibly stands aloof.

Next comes an essay by Peter Schjeldahl, a critic who must be an extremely agreeable companion because he never has a bad word to say about anything, at least anything produced by the standard artists of the Eighties. Mr. Schjeldahl is an apostle of the meta-criticism practiced by the late Harold Rosenberg, a mode of discourse that focuses on feelings rather than forms. Mr. Schjeldahl's combination of affability and impressionism have produced an essay rife with sentences like this one: "Part of my own typical response to [Polke's] work is a certain ache, like an ache to laugh, that is without issue, a sensation of blockage in the mechanism of humor, a monkey wrench lodged in the autonomic cycle of tension and release."

John Baldessari, the 1960s conceptual artist and, by virtue of his stewardship of the California Institute of Arts, aesthetic godfather to David Salle, Eric Fischl, and others, was called upon by Mr. Caldwell to certify Polke's importance with a brief encomium

1 "Sigmar Polke" opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (November 15, 1990-January 13, 1991) and was on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., from February 12 to May 7, 1991. The show will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (July 20-September 8, 1991), and to the Brooklyn Museum (October 11, 1991-January 6, 1992). A catalogue, featuring six essays and nearly one hundred plates, has been published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (151 pages, $50; $32.95 paper).

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called "Polke Is an Artist's Artist." Evidently this was intended to provide historical perspective. Ethnologist and filmmaker Michael Oppitz was asked to write "Ocher, Gold, Cinnabar and Ink, Turquoise," a metaphysical interpretation of Polke's use of color.

The final essay in the catalogue is by a collector named Dr. Reiner Speck and is a record of his vain pursuit of a Polke painting and the artist's coy response to his entreaties. The inclusion of Dr. Speck's essay is particularly significant, for it highlights the extent to which the art market and collectors of contemporary art have in recent years impinged on the running of our museums.

Needless to say, quite a buildup. Would that the exhibition had measured up! But it came nowhere near doing so. As one walked through the exhibition at the Hirshhorn (mercifully reduced from the one hundred works shown in San Francisco to around seventy-five), one experienced two conflicting sensations, acceleration and ennui: acceleration because the absence of anything to engage the eye (or mind) propelled one through it with ever-increasing speed, ennui because even in its abridged format the exhibition seemed to go on interminably.

Born in 1941 in what was to become East Germany (he fled west in 1953), Polke belongs to the same generation as his equally famous German contemporaries Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, and A. R. Penck. Polke's early works, like those of Richter, were in a Warhol-derived style that these two artists dubbed "Capitalist Realism." Though Polke's paintings of socks, plastic washtubs, and chocolate bars are warmed-over Pop art, they have a modicum of interest given their context. They were painted in a country rebuilding itself in the wake of a war by an artist whose childhood had been spent in the middle of it.

These were followed in the late 1960s by Roy Lichtenstein-like paintings recycling mass-media imagery in black and white, but with the Ben-Day dots enlarged to such a size that the image—a smiling chef floating above a pile of doughnuts, for example— becomes blurred and hard to read: Pop art as Op art.

Also at this time, Polke produced a succession of art gags, paintings in which the visual and philosophical concepts of modernism are undercut and satirized. Modernist abstraction comes under attack in *Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!* (1969), a reference to the transcendent aspirations of geometric abstraction. And in two paintings from 1968, *Lines of the Left Palm* and *Lines of the Right Palm*, each an enlarged tracing of one of Polke's hands onto a ground of Lurex material, Polke toys with the two definitions of "the artist's hand"—physical attribute and the painter's identifying manner and mark.

By the mid-1960s, Polke had made tentative forays into what was to become his characteristic mode—large paintings containing conflicting motifs, modes of representation, and materials. Typical of such work is *Alice in Wonderland*, from 1971. Here a copy of the Tenniel drawing of Alice and the caterpillar, which occupies the left two-thirds of the piece, competes for our attention with the silhouette of a jumping basketball player, which is placed on the right. Both of these images are painted on a surface of stitched-together strips of printed fabrics: blue with white polka dots, black with white polka dots, and a green-ground pattern of soccer balls and soccer players.

The mixture of materials in *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as its appropriation of familiar imagery from Tenniel and from sports, is intended as an attack on the governing assumptions of modernism, in particular its spiritual aspirations, the belief in a recognizable or "signature" style as the chief vehicle of meaning, and the importance of the artist's personal touch. The belief in Polke's importance rests on the conviction that he is free of such parochial constraints. As Peter Schjeldahl puts it in his catalogue essay: "in an era inundated with styles" Polke is "[immune] to the self-fulfilling and self-justifying imperatives of any style."

"Stylelessness" was one of the most cher-

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ished clichés of the 1980s. It is, of course, only so much rhetoric. One can as easily avoid the gradual crystallization of one's creative decisions into a recognizable pattern or manner as slip free of one's own shadow. Still, the idea served many needs. It allowed the artist to maintain an ironic distance between himself and his work, and it allowed critics to suspend the laws of aesthetic discrimination by claiming that the work in question conformed to no existing category.

No matter what one calls it—a style, idiom, or whatever—an artist's chosen mode of visual expression is the "voice" in which he chooses to communicate his ideas. The voice that Polke found during the late 1960s and the 1970s is wholly incapable of inflection, and the language of his imagery—based on eclectic appropriation from both "high" and "low" sources (and so influential on David Salle and Julian Schnabel)—is singularly facile. Polke's aggregations of images and marks may remind one of the blur of pictures and signs we encounter in our daily lives, or (as John Caldwell, stretching things, says in the catalogue) they may reflect multiple levels of consciousness. But when seen in quantity, they become victims of the very condition on which they ostensibly comment. The few notes struck in a Polke exhibition quickly turn into a monotonous, deadening drone.

The intrinsic limitations of Polke's manner become all too clear when the artist tries to tackle a serious idea. Like Kiefer, Polke took up the question of Germany's Nazi past, albeit briefly. In one painting, *Camp*, from 1982, Polke depicts the barbed-wire fencing of a concentration camp, a fiery glow occupying the top part of the picture, a dark, impenetrable painterly cloud occupying the bottom third. Everything about this painting, the scale and especially the device of locating the viewpoint—and thus the viewer—between the fences and thus inside the camp, is intended to bring home as forcefully as possible the horror of the massacres that occurred within all of them. Yet the effect is glib—shockingly so, considering the subject. Like Polke's other works on the subject, *Camp* isn't so much a painting about the Holocaust as a schematic illustration of it: a stock image of barbed-wire fences, black smoke, and eerie lighting.

The failure of *Camp* gives the lie to stylelessness as a viable mode of expression. Style is not a matter of ideology—an idea used to "deconstruct" an earlier aesthetic—but of artistic necessity, the means by which an artist, seeking appropriate form for an idea, gradually endows it with the necessary weight and resonance. A manner like Polke's, based as it is on received rather than invented forms, is wholly inadequate to a subject like the Holocaust, which perhaps more than any other needs to be passed through the crucible of the individual artist's imagination in order to become more than a cliché. Mr. Caldwell is evidently moved by clichés, for he praises the later series called *Watchtower*, which treats the same subject, for its repeated use of the "ordinary image" of a guardhouse on stilts "to suggest the horrifying reality of the concentration camps." Polke's style of combining mutiple styles is at best a rather primitive form of communication, one more on the order of mute pointing than of articulate speech.

Does the notion of an artist avoiding a definable style really imply the artist's escape from the past? A look at Polke's "alchemical" paintings provides the answer to that question. These works were painted during the 1980s, and reflect the impact of his years as a student of Joseph Beuys, in particular Beuys's view of art as a mysterious, unseen process of transformation. They consist of vast expanses of canvas covered in washes of resin into which have been sprinkled various chemicals and minerals.

They aren't paintings, really, nor are they intended to be, at least in the traditional sense. They are more like giant pieces of litmus paper, meant to change color over time and in different atmospheres. The trouble is, the transformation occurs so slowly that there isn't really much to look at. Standing in front of one of these "alchemical" paintings,

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you have the same thought as you do in front of a Duchamp Readymade: You hope no one you know spots you staring at it.

These "alchemical" paintings, and certain others made around the same time referring to drug use, could not have been conceived without the artist's being familiar with the abstract painting of the Sixties. In his earlier painting Polke has made clear he knows this work, in particular that of the color-field school. This is why it is so fatuous for John Caldwell in his essay to write of the 1983 *Hallucinogen*, a painting in which gestural sweeps of greenish pigment overlay an even horizontal banding of the same green interspersed with purple, that it is "unlike any other work of art one has ever seen" and that it "stands outside the world of art history."

Does Mr. Caldwell really believe this? If he does it disqualifies him from holding the kind of senior position in a major museum that he currently occupies, since it reflects a dire ignorance of recent art history. More to the point, it highlights a contradiction in Mr. Caldwell's thinking about art. You can't, as he does repeatedly, invoke Walter Benjamin and at the same time conceive of the studio as the locus of a virgin birth.

Mr. Caldwell's hyperbole is nothing new —it became the standard form of critical discourse during the Eighties. Nonetheless, Mr. Caldwell goes much further than anyone else has. He doesn't so much discuss Polke's work as complete it for him, making it into what Polke would most like it to be. Thus of *Modern Art* (1968), a painting with a variety of geometric and gestural marks on a black ground, Mr. Caldwell writes that it is "a brilliant parody of the conventions of geometric abstraction developed by Kandinsky and the constructivists; here they are reduced to ridiculous, vaguely Rube Goldbergish squiggles." If it is anything, the painting is yet another of Polke's rather slender art gags, a sarcastic expression of frustration or boredom by an artist at the start of his career who is, again in Mr. Caldwell's words, "beginning to wonder what to paint." To describe it as "brilliant" is to go rather too far.

Interpretive excess is a concept far from Mr. Caldwell's mind, however. *Alice in Wonderland*, the painting with the hookah-smoking caterpillar and the soccer-game-patterned fabric, is, for Mr. Caldwell, about "the experience of watching sports on television after consuming a drug, and shows the split consciousness between a rather irritable, partial awareness of the game and a stronger focus on the experience of the drug itself." And the power of *Hallucinogen* to suggest the experience of drugs is, to Mr. Caldwell, so great that "it is possible to take the painting's title in precisely the direct way it was meant and wonder if the canvas itself is not a psychedelic drug."

He saves the best for last, however. Writing of the alchemical paintings, he says, "We are in a strangely empty, yet magical landscape, in which the dust of meteors and of obscure chemical elements is moved about by silent, unfelt winds." It isn't the paintings so much as the criticism that aims to be "alchemical." But in the end Mr. Caldwell has no more success than the ancients did in attempting to turn dross into gold.

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Theater

A crown of withered parsley

by Donald Lyons

The 1991 Broadway season has been widely excoriated as the thinnest, the driest, the weakest, the saddest of recent times. The lamentation is part of an annual New York liturgy: with spring in bloom, the dying theatrical winter is reviled and scorned, heaped with ritual abuse, and driven whipped into the desert; then second thoughts are had; a *metanoia* occurs just in time for the awarding of parsley crowns and goatskins in late spring. The old man of the winter is hauled back from the wasteland and feted with Tonys.

One ought, though, to beware of too agnostic or disdainful an attitude toward traditional liturgies. They are often expressive of truth. This *was* a stinker of a season. I have already expressed my reservations about the insufficiently digested topicalities of *Six Degrees of Separation*, the season's *succès d'estime*, and my enthusiasm for the audacious humors of *The Big Love*, one of the season's quick failures. It remains to have a look at some sample fare: two spectacles about Western intrusiveness into the Orient (*Miss Saigon* and *Our Country's Good*) and two New York-based coming-of-age comedies (*Lost in Yonkers* and *I Hate Hamlet*).

The phenomenon of *Miss Saigon* is curious. It is the work of two French songwriters, Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, who have made a career of transposing history, mainly French history, into musicals. Their first collaboration was in 1973, on *La Revolution Française*, described in the *Playbill* as "the very first French musical." In 1980 their *Les Misérables* opened in Paris; this one proved exportable to London and New York. It culminates, I gather, in the spectacle of the July Revolution of 1830 that established the bourgeois monarchy of Louis Philippe; one of its key scenes involves a virtual re-creation of Delacroix's triumphalist *Liberty Leading the People*. The prolific pair neglected to make musicals out of 1848 (they could have pressed Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* into service for this one) or the Commune of 1871 or the trenches and mutinies of World War I or the collapse and collaboration of World War II or the colonial debacle in Algeria. They leapt forward, instead, to another French colonial outpost, if in a post-French phase: Vietnam.

All this, far from being novel, is in an old and silly French tradition, of which Paul Johnson, in his new book *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830*, entertainingly describes an early phase:

> A version of the first popular revolt in Naples had been done in 1825 on the boulevards and in 1826 at the *Opéra Comique*, in a libretto by Lafontelle and Moreau with music by Carafa. Performance of the second version had been allowed only after six series of changes following the censor's objections, but it was a smash hit, and many of its songs became popular airs. As a result, the playwright Augustin-Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) and the composer Daniel-François

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Auber (1782-1871) conceived the idea of yet another version, this time a sophisticated, "serious" one, for the Opéra. Scribe cleverly cooked the plot to get round the censors. The device of the dumb girl; the fact that the revolutionary leader was not only killed but seen to be killed by a wicked, undisciplined mob; the presence of an angry Vesuvius as symbol of divine retribution on the mob—these concealed both from the Opéra's own examining body of writers and musicians and the censors the real radical thrust of *La Muette de Portici*. No text was ever gone over more carefully, but all that the censors asked to be removed were a few phrases: *il faut armer le peuple*, *le peuple est maître*, *votre reine est à vos genoux*, and so forth. Once the text was cleared, the immense resources of the Opéra were devoted to a spectacular production. The censors thought Auber's music was too highbrow to be popular, but they did not foresee Ciceri's brilliantly realistic sets, which permitted immense and dramatic crowd scenes, or the costumes, which drew sharp class distinctions and gave the production a flavor of class warfare. To top it all, the production team was sent to La Scala to study its famous volcano machinery, and the Vesuvius explosion alone would have sold out the house.

How little has changed, except, of course, that there is no fear of *Miss Saigon*'s music being thought too highbrow to be popular! *Miss Saigon*'s music is rather beneath than above popularity. The sounds of *Miss Saigon* are nonstop, homogeneous, and annoyingly overmiked; they include a chorus of GIs in a bar lustily belting "The heat is on in Saigon," the ingenuous GI hero anguishedly belting "Christ I'm an American / How could I fail to do good / All I made was a mess, just like everyone else / In a place full of mystery / That I never once understood," and the long-suffering Oriental maiden sadly belting "I'd give my life for you" (she does). This aggressively unmelodic, clumsily lyricized pap will never be a challenge to the popularity of Rodgers and Hammerstein or Jerome Kern or Cole Porter.

Music aside, Boublil-Schönberg are no Scribe-Auber. Their Vietnam story is a ragged quilt of borrowed patches. The central plot is from—no, *is*—*Madame Butterfly*. (Poor Butterfly has had a tough decade; her last metamorphosis was as a transvestite in the fiction-no-match-for-the-truth *M. Butterfly*.) Keeping the proceedings moving is a Master of the Revels, a sort of generic pimp/hustler in the remote tradition of Jonson's Mosca and in the immediate tradition of the chalk-faced MC in *Cabaret*, of whom this character, hymning the American instead of the German dream while copulating with a Cadillac, is but a very slightly altered redaction.

The politics of this thing are a woeful muddle. From all reports, it was much more strongly anti-American and anticapitalist in London, where it opened in 1989—not a vintage year for anticapitalism. It has been further, and shrewdly, foreseen that 1991 might not be a good year for anti-Americanism, especially *in* America. So the American hero is a nice guy who loves and tries to save his forlorn bargirl as he is helicoptered out in 1975. The victorious North Vietnamese are robotic humanoids who gyrate mechanically beneath a towering silver statue of Ho Chi Minh, his face eerily seeming to be both his own and Lenin's; these cadres wear severe black pajamas, carry red banners, and cavort before walls draped in bright red swatches. There *are* connections, as well as discriminations, to be made on the subject of totalitarianism and mass spectacle; the beginning of wisdom here is to differentiate between Nuremberg and Red Square on the one hand and Busby Berkeley on the other. But *Miss Saigon*, whoring after sensation, daffily blends all, and even in this it is not original: its trivializing and aestheticizing iconography is pinched from the cinema of Bertolucci, in particular *The Last Emperor* and *The Conformist*.

Indeed, *Miss Saigon* has been criticized by the critic at *The New York Times* for failing to offer "any thoughtful analysis of the war" —that is, for insufficient attention to the unique wickedness and atrocity-proneness of America—and for saying "merely that the

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North Vietnamese were villains and the Americans were misguided, bungling do-gooders." But alas, tut-tutting from the liberal establishment is not in itself indication of an interesting play. *Miss Saigon*, derivative and confused, has desperate resort to technological gimmickry. Its exploding Vesuvius is a descending helicopterlike device that is supposed to be removing the last GIs deserting our local toadies. The best comment I've seen on the phoniness (moral, not only technological) of this is a piece in the Sunday *Times* by Robert Stone, who pointed out that, long before eighty-one choppers took six thousand people out of Saigon in April 1975 in "the largest helicopter operation ever mounted until the recent gulf war," the last GIs had left by chartered airliner in March 1973. Mr. Stone is superb on the real Saigon, recalling with an artist's eye its "enormous drunken" cockroaches, its "cheeseburgers made of water buffalo and bootleg Velveeta," its beer made of formaldehyde, its ubiquitous dope, its actual bargirls—often part Senegalese from French days—speaking not *Miss Saigon*'s "pleasant and humorous" pidgin English but a "lingua franca of the bars . . . horrifying, dehumanizing, obscene." Mr. Stone's words, like any true testimony, shame *Miss Saigon*.

The play's most offensive moment comes in a loud plea, virtually directed to the audience, for the relief of halfbreed GI babies in Nam. This, in the middle of a musical whose top ticket is an unprecedented $100, is truly worthy of Volpone—Volpone the character, that is, not *Volpone* the play. Jonathan Pryce, who plays the MC, and Lea Salonga, who plays the bargirl, were both the subject of prolonged public wrangling over their racial and national correctness for their roles. Their critics chose the wrong ground of attack; rather, it can be said that they are both competent but quite replaceable twin rotors in the roar of a helicopter. Noise is the point here, not personality.

Our Country's Good is the Hartford Stage Company's production of a British play about a group of convicts putting on a play. The convicts are Britons who were transported to penal Australia in 1789. A benign officer, played by Peter Frechette, has the notion that having the convicts stage Irish dramatist George Farquhar's post-Restoration comedy *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) will civilize them by inculcating the play's values—respect for property and marriage. Meaner officers prefer the whip and the rope to thespian penology.

The stage is dominated by the skeleton of a rotting ship—doubtless a symbol of colonialism and class oppression. The staging, by Mark Lamos, and the acting are as wooden as the ship. The form of the play, adapted by American Timberlake Wertenbaker from a historical novel, *The Playmaker* by Thomas Keneally, is "epic": players intone the title of a scene at its start (for example, "The Loneliness of Man," or "An Aborigine Muses on the Nature of Dreams"); every scene has a polemical point; actors double parts; actresses play officers and parsons of 1789. The didactic thrust of the enterprise is forever in our face. We are ceaselessly made aware of the author's unflagging indignation at: hanging a woman of eighty-two for swiping a bottle of whiskey; shooting kangaroos; shooting cockatoos, "the most beautiful of birds"; flogging for impertinence; scab labor; taking the Bible seriously; the rich having more than the poor; religious and racial oppression; the aborigines' being intruded upon by whites; children being hanged; a child being ineptly hanged so it has to be done twice; plays being about only rich people, and on and on. The most depressing aspect of all this ventriloquism is its utter predictability, its refusal to surprise: we know at about a quarter after eight just which rough diamonds will shine in the rehearsal process; who will take advantage of relaxed rehearsal conditions to run away and be caught and be killed; just when the beneficent officer will discover humanity and even lovability in the transformed prisoners. Farquhar, in all his rich language, remains pretty much unheard here; nothing of his voice is allowed to interrupt Miss Wertenbaker's catechism. Plato's account of Socrates teaching a slave geometry

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is treated ironically here, but the script manifests a schoolmasterly tone of its own. The device of outcasts of one kind or another finding self-confidence and solidarity through putting on a play is by now a staple of television sitcom, a form that rivals "epic" theater in its formulaically moralizing dullness. So concerned is the author here to shoot easy moral baskets that she takes the fun out of playing. At one point in *Our Country's Good* (the labored irony of the title is typical), somebody announces that "injustice is the ugliest word in the English language." I think "agitprop" is uglier, myself.

Neil Simon has a gift. Or rather several, not always cooperating gifts. He began as a gag and skit writer in the Golden Age of television comedy, working for, among others, Sid Caesar. He is one of the few playwrights —Larry Gelbart and the only sporadically theatrical Woody Allen come to mind—to have emerged from that constellation of humorists. And he has thence retained an aptitude for the wisecrack, a hankering for the undercutting, deflating, comically incongruous side of any presented situation. It comes easy to him, and he does it well, but this compulsive deflection of emotion into generic gags has had perils for the dramatist, leaving him without a developed vocabulary for articulating the serious themes that have come to occupy him.

But Mr. Simon has a stronger suit up his sleeve. He is the poet of a certain range of male, fraternal abrasiveness, staying comic mostly but verging from time to time on real hatred. The most artistically usable relationship in his life has to date been that with his slightly older, cantankerous, and less successful brother. Echoes, reshapings of that affinity, inform the playwright's best work: *The Odd Couple* (1965) and the much finer *Sunshine Boys* (1972). It is also one of the spines of his latest play, *Lost in Yonkers*, which concerns a pair of brothers, about fourteen and twelve, left with their forbidding paternal grandmother for a year in 1942, when their father (their mother being dead) has to take a job as a traveling salesman in the South. The two kids, little Mozarts of the quip, wield their comic precocity as a defensive shield against the strangeness and potential malevolence of their new environment. There is much that is artificial about the boys, perfectly played by Jamie Marsh and Danny Girard, as they bounce their brittle mots off each other, but the hint of real danger in the air anchors the youths and the play. In this respect, *Lost in Yonkers* has more energy, more focus than Simon's merely autobiographical trilogy of Brooklyn *Bildung* plays: *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues*, and *Broadway Bound*—in all of which it is difficult to remember exactly what happened; all that survives in the memory is a mood.

The denizens of the Yonkers house begin as foils for the boys, but soon achieve autonomy. I pretermit a colorful and wholly improbable petty-criminal uncle who patterns himself after Jimmy Cagney. Grandma is the center; she is a coiled spring of resentment and anger. Crippled in an anti-Semitic riot in Germany in 1918, she has let the hardness of her early years, and of her immigrant experiences running the candy store above which they all live, calcify her heart. Above all she persecutes and terrifies her woebegone moth of a daughter, Bella, unmarried and unloved. Bella, who spends her days at Bette Davis movies, is so flighty and scatterbrained that she is often taken for retarded, but the only real retardation is emotional, though her heart is kind. This then—a daughter's fight for life against a paralyzing mother's death grip—is the play's second spine (two spines being, of course, as awkward in a play as in a body).

In attempting to realize the emancipation of Bella in the last act, Mr. Simon goes for the large emotions. Here at last there are no wisecracks. "I need to love and be loved," she avows. "I want to be soft with babies, not cold." She takes a stab at romance with a local movie usher, who turns out to be truly retarded and frightened of commitment. Dismayed but undeterred by her little taste of life, Bella makes bold to confess to her adamantine mother that, starved for love,

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she has been promiscuous out of desperation. The playing of this is better than the writing; so is the staging, by Gene Saks, and the wittily presented brown interior gloom of set designer Santo Loquasto. Irene Worth does not soften or sentimentalize Grandma. With a touch of her Volumnia from *Coriolanus* and of her Winnie from *Happy Days*, she gives a flinty majesty to the drama, magnetizing the force fields onstage around her. Mercedes Ruehl, with surprising comic strategies, always manages to skirt the quicksands of bathos and self-pity Bella invites. Yet she is not merely funny, either; life's Bellas aren't.

But Mr. Simon has not the voice to animate his theme as eloquently as it demands. He seems to have had recourse to the voices of Tennessee Williams. The mother-daughter relationship here might seem the negative of that in *The Glass Menagerie*, where a neurotically extroverted mother is ostensibly eager to thrust her daughter into life. But the tremulous accents of Laura Wingfield are heard in Bella, as are those of a later Williams heroine, Blanche Dubois. Bella's nymphomaniac side (a bit unlikely at best) seems confected from Blanche's: "The opposite [of death] is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder? Not far from Belle Reve, before we had lost Belle Reve, was a camp where they trained young soldiers. On Saturday nights . . ." and so on. Blanche—Belle Reve—Bella—is this a case of anxious influence?

Finally Bella snaps out of her mawkishness, buys a Bing Crosby record, and lays down the law to her mother. It is a sunny ending, one within Simon's range and in consonance with what works best in this asymmetric drama that shows a likable small talent of today trying to be a 1940s playwright—down to the tones and tags and topics of the times, including its playwrights like Williams and Miller and even Odets.

(A minor success in *Lost in Yonkers* is the sad, gentle, patriotic, struggling, dignified father; the character shows a Simon perhaps more comfortable in Miller territory than in Williams country, and he is beautifully played by Marc Blum.)

Young Andrew Rally, star of TV's "Rookie Surgeon," has come to New York to play Hamlet in Central Park (a good hit, this, at Public Theater casting practices). He moves into an apartment once inhabited by John Barrymore, who materializes to offer advice to the younger actor eager to learn "the ancient secret of the Hamlets." Barrymore regards the opportunity to coach the kid as his "cosmic lunge at redemption." Such is the premise of the Broadway comedy *I Hate Hamlet* by Paul Rudnick. I saw this play twice, once with Evan Handler as Rally and later with his understudy, Andrew Mutnick. Both were adequate, Mr. Handler nerdily sympathetic in a Matthew Broderick vein, Mr. Mutnick stronger but monotonous. As for Nicol Williamson in the Barrymore role and tights, he was prone to go up in his lines the first time. This he got over, but he persisted in a curious habit of wandering upstage and offstage during other actors' dialogue, even exiting on their laugh lines. For the rest, he managed a convincing rendition of an egomaniac, if not of the particular egomaniac John Barrymore. Veteran stage and screen actress Celeste Holm is a seasoned boulevard pro, but had little to do here as Andrew's agent and an old flame of Barrymore's. It was the secondary, younger performers who stole the show: Caroline Aaron as the haunted apartment's eccentric broker; Jane Adams as the daffy, pretty ingénue, girlfriend of Andrew and "Ophelia's best friend" in Central Park; and especially Adam Arkin as a philistine, materialistic Hollywood pal of the high-minded actor.

The play reveals Mr. Rudnick to be an apt comic pupil of Neil Simon's and Larry Gelbart's—not to mention Jack Benny's—brand of repartee. But he has a shaky and larval sense of construction: the whole Barrymore-redivivus conceit actually becomes an albatross on the neck of the play. The writer has no idea where to go with it. He has failed to think through a coherent attitude to John Barrymore. Was Barrymore a great Hamlet who later went to pot in Hollywood? Was he a boozing, womanizing ham? The play wants to have it all ways. The upshot is a blur. The

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truth about Barrymore's 1922 Hamlet, so routinely described as "electrifying"—though Edmund Wilson remarked on his "bitterness" in the role—is now ungraspable, but that is no excuse for Mr. Rudnick's failure of decision here. A useful clue, though, lies in the fact that John Barrymore's best surviving work is in flamboyantly comic turns in films like *Twentieth Century*, *Midnight*, and *Dinner at Eight* (some chiaroscuro in this last, to be sure).

Actually, Andrew Rally might more fruitfully—for dramatic purposes—have moved into the digs of Edwin Booth, whose one-hundred-night 1864 Hamlet in New York is equally legendary.

Or, alternatively, Mr. Rudnick might have had his Barrymore attempt not to educate but to destroy his successor. This would have made for conflict, structure, interest. *And* it would have anticipated what actually occurred during the run of *I Hate Hamlet*. As a climax (apparently) to much untoward behavior, Mr. Williamson one night during the first act berated and struck inopportunely with a sword Mr. Handler, who promptly walked offstage and quit. Hence, the understudy, and my return to the Walter Kerr Theatre. Next time, let Mr. Rudnick incorporate such Stoppardian meta-theater in his original script and not merely leave it to unfold in the tabloids.

But what the author *can* do, and delightfully, is have fun with sex and show business. For example, *Ingénue:* Tell me about sex. *Woman friend:* Sex is great with the right guy. *Ingénue:* What about with the wrong guy? *Friend:* [Pause.] Better.—And there is also the knowing fun poked at the pretentiousness of "art" by the Hollywood guy: "Shakespeare is algebra onstage. . . . Central Park? Shakespeare for squirrels. . . . [Besides Central Park, New York theater is] Chekhov; it's in a basement; it's July; it's folding chairs and you fold 'em up after each show." He believes deeply in the millions on offer in California and sincerely sees TV as the *telos* of human culture, because "you don't have to pay attention." This impish philistinism is the real voice of the play, and a tonic voice it is.

Trouble is, the author is ashamed of it and denies it. He has his hero opt for folding chairs. He has Barrymore deliver, in what is supposed to be a rapt moment, Hamlet's Advice to the Players. (Mr. Williamson rattles through it, seeming not to see that its counsel of moderation is the antithesis of his own performance.) He has his hero find redemption in causing a bored kid in the audience to actually *listen* to "To be or not to be." But it is too late for Mr. Rudnick's play to get religion. It has had too much fun sinning, and its conversion to "art" is totally unconvincing. Mr. Rudnick has nothing to tell us about *Hamlet*, but he does have much to entertain us with about show business. Good comedy—which this fitfully is—has no need to kowtow to "culture" at the final curtain. Look what Aristophanes used to do to Euripides.

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Books

Fundamentals of Soviet civilization

by Vasily Rudich

At a moment when history's revenge seems to have fallen on the Soviet Union, unleashing economic havoc and political disintegration, it is appropriate to examine anew the monstrosity known as "fully developed socialism." Even if *perestroika* fails, the society that emerges from the current upheaval will surely depart radically from what we have come to think of as the "classical" Soviet paradigm. At the least, the new Soviet society will be free from Communist ideology. Whatever happens, there is little likelihood that Marxism-Leninism will soon be revived in Russia. The loss of this ideology will necessarily affect the individual and collective psyche and, although it remains far from certain that the nation will embrace democracy, some familiar bugbears, such as "class struggle" and "egalitarianism," will surely be laid to rest.

Andrei Sinyavsky's new book, *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History*,[1] provides a penetrating epitaph for the Marxist-Leninist period of Russian history. The book's Russian title—literally, *Fundamentals of Soviet Civilization*—is a drily ironic allusion to such stock Soviet university textbook titles as *Fundamentals of Dialectical Materialism*, and it better communicates the author's intentions than the English title. What Sinyavsky has produced is both an introduction and a summary, a thesis and an illustration, that will help Western readers come to grips with attitudes and ideas that in many respects appear to them alien and bizarre. None of the bestsellers written on this subject by American journalists—Robert Kaiser, Hedrick Smith, et al.—or, for that matter, by professional sovietologists, are as elegant and persuasive as *Soviet Civilization*. In this clear-eyed insider's account, Sinyavsky felicitously combines insightful generalization with illuminating anecdote, scholarly comment with personal experience. In the hands of a lesser writer, such stylistic variety would doubtless have resulted in a literary shambles. Sinyavsky has managed to weave the disparate threads of his argument into a compelling tapestry of Soviet life that is at once compassionate and witty.

Sinyavsky's choice of themes bears witness to the breadth of his intellectual interests. The book ranges widely from social psychology and anthropology to political philosophy and literary criticism—such criticism, indeed, being a craft in which Sinyavsky particularly excels. Above all, *Soviet Civilization* teaches us to appreciate the delusions of Soviet reality as reflected in the fictional world of Socialist Realism.

The book's subtitle, "A Cultural History," is an acceptable description of its genre, provided that we understand "cultural history" in the least academic sense. What Sinyavsky has given us is not a learned monograph festooned with references and statistics but

1 *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History*, by Andrei Sinyavsky, translated from the Russian by Joanne Turnbull with Nikolai Formozov; Arcade, 291 pages, $24.95.

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rather an informed—albeit informal—meditation aimed at exposing the labyrinthine intricacies of one of the twentieth century's greatest historical aberrations. Sinyavsky's approach exhibits an affinity with the tradition of Russian *Kulturphilosophie* flourishing in émigré literature before and after World War II. For example, his book often reminds one of the works of Georgii Fedotov—an author who is frequently quoted in this volume—and Nikolai Berdyaev. Both writers were highly esteemed during their lifetimes but at present are virtually unknown to the Western reader.

Sinyavsky's narrative also recalls more recent émigré writings on politics and society, particularly those by Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov and Mikhail Voslensky. While none of this work has received due attention in America, I have no doubt that in time Avtorkhanov's *Technology of Power* and Voslensky's *Nomenklatura* will come to be considered classics. In the meantime, I well remember how the latter was dismissed in a small column of *The New York Times Book Review* as lacking in interest for Kremlinologists.

The tradition of cultural philosophy has provided Sinyavsky with both a starting point and a perspective for his exploration of the character and achievements of the "new man," *homo sovieticus.* The émigré political writers must have influenced the way he analyzed the florid arcana of the Soviet power structure and made them comprehensible to an uninitiated reader. His book abounds in telling details. "A friend of mine from a fairly well off family of intellectuals," Sinyavsky writes, "lived in the same small room with his parents and grandmother until he was middle-aged, sleeping on a folding bed that was stowed away during the day and set out each night, part of it tucked under the table. So that my friend slept half under the table." Not only does this communicate something of the horror of living in a communal apartment: it also encapsulates the very idea of collectivism, the professed foundation of the Soviet way of life.

In the early 1970s, when I was still living in the Soviet Union, one of the most popular words in the milieu to which I belonged was *marasmus*: a strange word of dubious medical extraction. There was a general sense that "marasmus," like God, was all-powerful and omnipresent in the life of the country. When asked by an American friend what the word means, I answered half-jokingly that "marasmus" is a coefficient indicating the contrast between the natural and unnatural orders of things. It is precisely by exploiting this implied contrast that Sinyavsky has made his "cultural history" so instructive.

Before portraying the accumulated absurdities that constitute Soviet civilization, Sinyavsky inquires into the nature of the Russian Revolution and the origins of the Bolshevik state. In outline, his argument is that the new society was founded on the reciprocity of pseudo-science and pseudo-religion. Both affect not only the specifics of Communist ideology but also the popular imagination and the characters of the men in charge. The religious fervor that saturated the movement found tortuous expression in the visionary poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Alexander Blok. Sinyavsky is particularly astute in distinguishing between Western agnosticism and Russian "theomachy" or "God-resistance," which was epitomized by Mayakovsky. "[T]he Russian atheist resister of God," he writes,

> in his innermost soul, in his subconscious, grants that God exists and begins to test him, to provoke him, or else to debate mentally with him in a contest to determine who is the better, the more just, or the stronger. This partly explains the Bolsheviks' extravagant acts against sacred objects, as when . . . they lined [icons] up against a wall and shot at them, as if, for these atheist resisters of God, the icons were living beings.

This ambivalent, though virulent, atheism is made palpable in Blok's famous poem "The Twelve," in which a drunken and murderous detachment of twelve Red Guards roams the streets of the capital either being led by, or aiming their guns at, Jesus Christ. It must be

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remembered, however, that a similar irrational dimension has been present in other revolutionary movements, from medieval heresies to the "civic religion" of the Jacobins. It helps to recall in this context the distinction introduced by the French scholar Alain Besançon regarding the psychology of religion and gnosticism. Besançon observes that the religious man knows that he believes, whereas the gnostic believes that he knows. This last is, of course, what Marxism-Leninism is all about. Despite the convoluted jargon dispensed to conceal its provenance, Marxism-Leninism remains an unlovely offspring of the illicit love affair between pseudo-religion and pseudo-science: it is gnosticism for the modern age.

A fascination with science—or with what has been considered science—constituted, as Sinyavsky points out, the most prominent feature of Lenin's personality. The chapter on the founder of Bolshevism is subtitled "The State of Scholars." The Russian text is not available to me, but I strongly suspect that "scholars" is a mistranslation. The Russian word *uchenyj* can mean "scholar," but the context makes it clear that the meaning here intended by the author is "scientist." Least of all was Lenin interested in scholarship or the study of the humanities. What he had in mind—and what Sinyavsky portrays as partially implemented—is the project of "scientocracy": a government of scientists, that is, Marxist ideologists who are scientists by definition since Marxism is synonymous with science. Had Lenin succeeded, he would have accomplished the first historical realization of a scheme as old as that announced in Plato's *Republic*—the rule of the wise. Since Marxism is also synonymous with wisdom, it follows that its best practitioners are entitled to the role of philosopher-kings. In this sense, at least, the Aristotelian definition of aristocracy as "the government of the best" is in full accord with Lenin's vision of the Communist Party. He declared that the Party is "the Mind, Honor, and Conscience of our epoch." "If the Party is the mind of the proletariat," writes Sinyavsky, "and Lenin is the mind of the Party, then Lenin and his dictatorship embody the entire democracy of this new type, or the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Rationalism, however, when inflexible and fully consistent, leads to a vicious circle. Just as Socrates, the seeker for truth, was forced by Plato's own logic to implant "the noble lie" in the very foundation of the ideal city, so Lenin's "scientificality" resulted in nothing but technology plus legalized terror. As Sinyavsky observes, "Lenin evidently lacked the irrationality that is natural in any person. And since he had only his brain, his rationalism assumed irrational proportions."

This "irrational proportion" of rationalism proved a most fertile soil for the advent of Stalin, who transformed Lenin's pseudo-scientific Utopia into the atheistic pseudo-Church. Sinyavsky's discussion of Stalin's personality is one of the most absorbing parts of the book. He is right to concentrate on Stalin's personality to reveal the essence of Stalinism. As Tacitus observed centuries ago, under tyranny it is the tyrant's character that matters. The pathology of the ruler is reflected in the pathology of the ruled. It suffices to recall how Stalin's habit of working at night forced the same work schedule on the entire state bureaucracy; and it seems somehow appropriate that the draconian regime was particularly active at the hour of the wolf—the time favored by demons and vampires.

It was no accident that Stalin, a failed seminarian, once likened the Communist Party to the medieval military-religious Order of the Sword-Bearers. Like the reign of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, Stalin's reign was built on mystery, miracle, and authority. As Sinyavsky realizes, these hold the key to Stalin's power. To illustrate Stalin's "dark fascination," he makes excellent use of many anecdotes about him, "both entirely and partially documentary, written or oral." Comparing his task to the work of ancient biographers who treated quasi-folklore as a historical source, Sinyavsky correctly remarks that "[i]t doesn't so much matter whether it is truth or invention, since conjecture can

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contain more of reality than the facts." He even recommends that an anthology of all these vignettes, historical legends, and anecdotes be compiled. It is worth mentioning that such a collection, entitled the *Staliniad*, has, in fact, been recently published in the Soviet Union. It makes for remarkable reading, and one hopes that it will soon be translated into English.

A true artist himself, Sinyavsky strikingly explores what he regards as the artistic dimensions of Stalin's psyche, including his aesthetic preferences, his malicious humor, and the twisted ingenuity he displayed as both director and performer of the macabre spectacles he staged. "The endless possibilities for substituting evil for good and vice versa were the stuff of Stalin's unfathomable mystery, of his black secret." This uncanny vision of Stalin's mysticism and aestheticism must have inspired the eerie and memorable scene in Sinyavsky's latest novel, *Goodnight!*, where the ghost of the dead dictator is compelled to visit his victims in a futile quest, and appeal, for atonement.

Some believe that Soviet orthodoxy, all-pervasive and irresistible as it seems, has succeeded in giving birth to a new anthropological species—*homo sovieticus*. This, at least, has been its professed intention from the beginning. Human nature, asserted Marx, is nothing but a summary of social relations; if the latter are transformed, the former can be fundamentally remodeled. The final product, the "new man," is a subject of Sinyavsky's special interest. Anyone who grew up in the Soviet regime—even he who has subsequently repudiated it—knows that some visceral responses instilled in the *homo sovieticus* are difficult if not impossible to eradicate. For example, even now, after a decade living outside the Soviet Union, I still experience a peculiar exultation whenever I hear the Communist anthem, *The Internationale*.

Starting with the discussion of the revolutionary elite, Sinyavsky demonstrates how the heroism and asceticism of these "new men" could be compatible with their role as informers and executioners. The moral relativism preached by Marxists—their insistence that the end justifies the means—required an unquestioning obedience to the interests of the revolution, which in turn meant an unquestioning faith in the authority of the leader. Thus could the poet Eduard Bagritsky extol the latter with the sincerity of a true believer: "But if he says: 'Lie!', you will lie, / But if he says: 'Kill!', you will kill."

As Sinyavsky points out, it is a grotesque irony that the founder of the Cheka, "Iron" Felix Dzerzhinsky, showed a lifelong devotion to children and the young, setting up many orphanages. Dzerzhinsky's innermost dream, according to memoirists, was to become the People's Commissar of Education. Such a conversion of "the chief executioner" into "the chief educator" would have signified the triumph of Communist morality. Dzerzhinsky's pattern of behavior helps explain the collusion of literature and the secret police in the early post-revolutionary years. "The trusted writer and the responsible Chekist: both work with human material, with the complexities of psychology. Both must have subtlety and insight, an ability to read into hearts. Both must reform humanity: one with words, the other with deeds."

But Sinyavsky—like Ortega y Gasset—saves his deepest contempt for the "standardized" man of the masses, "the most frightening thing that Soviet civilization has produced." The usual behavior of the Soviet mass-man manifests itself in *khamstvo*, an untranslatable word suggesting a particularly obnoxious air of aggressive vulgarity. The source of this evil, as the cultural philosopher Grigory Pomerants put it an essay from the 1960s, is moral semi-education. The mass-man, Sinyavsky notes, "is a savage who thinks that he knows all, that he is the pearl of creation." It was individuals of this mold who called Boris Pasternak "a nasty toad" in print and who now cry for Sinyavsky's blood, denouncing him as the leader of the "Russophobic" conspiracy allegedly organized by the Jews and Freemasons.

All this said, it remains uncertain whether the *homo sovieticus* does in fact represent a de-

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finitive and irremediable alteration of the national character. I rather think not. In the end, human nature resists, both in good and evil, artificial trappings. No amount of indoctrination can affect it permanently. Even though egalitarianism and a reliance on the authorities dominate the consciousness of the average Soviet man, the experience of emigration indicates how much depends on individual character, talent, and propensities. Some expatriates have failed to adjust and made their lives miserable; others have left their former attitudes behind and successfully integrated themselves into their new environment.

At present, with the collapse of the official ideology in Russia, a wide spectrum of social and cultural expression has come to the surface. There are even some novel types, the "anti-alcohol mystics," for example, or the "Komsomol punks." In my judgment, despite the threat of setbacks, all this points to the beginnings of the psychological emancipation necessary for a genuinely pluralistic society.

As for Marxism's "new" way of life, it is not surprising that a regime founded on the "expropriation of the expropriators" and on the proclamation of public property (which in reality "belongs to everyone and to no one") led to the rise of poverty and corruption. Stealing from the state is regarded by culprits as a thing to be proud of, harsh punishments prescribed by law (including the death penalty) notwithstanding. Sinyavsky portrays with gusto the process of society's "criminalization," which leads finally to the convergence of the Party hierarchy and the Mafia: "On the bottom, chaos and penury reign. At the top, everything has been stolen from others. . . . There is no life in any real sense."

It is impossible to convey Sinyavsky's trenchant wit in summary. Like his incisive comments on the Soviet language and its own version of "newspeak"—which furnishes us with such novelties as using "Electrification" as a female name—it must be read to get the full effect. He amply recognizes the value of "countercultural" folklore and its fondness for pointed political anecdote, rightly seeing in its intricate verbal pyrotechnics proof of "the people's vast and fertile linguistic creativity."

The final chapter of Sinyavsky's book, entitled "Hopes and Alternatives," offers his perspective on the dissident movement, its achievements, and the prospects for democracy in Russia. Even the term *glasnost*, he notes, was borrowed by Gorbachev from the dissident vocabulary. At the same time, the activity of the dissidents has always been governed by a moral imperative, not a political program; as a result, very few dissidents are both willing and able to engage in present-day politics. The lack of unity among democrats facilitates the consolidation of the nefarious forces that one Soviet journalist aptly described as "an alliance of the Third Rome, the Third Reich, and the Third International."

Sinyavsky likens Soviet civilization to an Egyptian pyramid "constructed of mammoth pieces of stone, painstakingly fitted together, lapped, and polished": a "mass of dead stone, an impressive monumentality dedicated to our once grandiose goals, now unattainable, for the usable space within is infinitesimal." Such is the image: "Inside, a mummy: Lenin's. Outside, a windswept desert: sand." Can a pyramid, he asks, be converted into a Parthenon? This is a powerful metaphor. But being a metaphor, it is based on analogy, which—as Aristotle taught us—cannot be considered proof. History, in any event, is essentially unpredictable.

The belief in the malleability of human nature, central to the Marxist blueprint for the new society, proved to be a fatal—and fateful—error. The Soviet empire, standing on that flawed cornerstone, now begins to stagger, calling to mind not so much an Egyptian pyramid as the biblical Colossus with feet of clay. For Russia, there is no way back. During the years of *perestroika*, the absurdities of Soviet reality have been so thoroughly and mercilessly exposed by the media that there is hardly anyone in the entire country, including the party apparatchiks, who has not ex-

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perienced at least momentary feelings of shame and revulsion. Sinyavsky, a pessimist, seems to believe that Russia's future will in all probability take the form of a fascist theocracy, with the Orthodox Church supplanting the Soviet state. An optimist, however, can point to numerous signs of convalescence. The effects of a serious illness that has lasted for seventy years naturally will make recovery slow and painful. But one may hope that, with the arrival of a new generation uncontaminated by the past, Russia, like postwar Germany, will undergo a moral and spiritual rebirth and assume her rightful place in the community of mankind.

Hero

Donald Kagan Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy. The Free Press, 287 pages, $22.50

reviewed by James Bowman

When-I-was-a-boy I was given a magic book. It was written by a man who wrote "when I was a boy" with hyphens between the words in order, as it didn't take me long to figure out, to poke gentle fun at the way that old folks like him talked to children. Yet I never felt that he was talking down to me. On the contrary, his occasional reminiscences of a happy and unremarkable childhood only made the magic comfortable when it might have been scary. For it was the story of the whole world from the time when, he told me, the earth was thrown out of the sun like a spark from a log fire until the Korean War, which, I was vaguely aware, had been going on during my lifetime.

The magic book was called *A Child's History of the World* and the magician's name was V. M. Hillyer, who, the title page informed me, was the late Head Master of the Calvert School in Baltimore. I remember hoping that, in this case, "late" did not mean dead, though I feared it did because the book had been revised and updated by another man, Edward G. Huey, also of the Calvert School. I was not aware of any difference in style between these two hands. The book, like history itself, appeared to me to be a seamless web into which all the strands were woven with a terrible moral inevitability. Hillyer was a believer in Kipling's Gods of the Copybook Headings (though I only discovered that poem years later), and when he wrote of the fall of civilizations he would add: "Old Lycurgus would have said, 'I told you so.'"

Not that Lycurgus was the hero of his story. But the Spartan's mythic status in it was rather like that of the Furies of Greek legend, those grim guardians of rectitude whom it was equally impossible to love and to circumvent. In his account of Lycurgus himself, Hillyer drew a clear distinction between the Spartan and Athenian ideals. Both were admirable in their respective ways. The Spartans were "hard as nails," he said, while "the Athenians believed in training the mind *as well* as the body." It was left to my boyish conscience to decide which of the two philosophies I liked better. Like all good teachers, Hillyer knew in advance which one I would choose.

And because of the pattern set up by this opposition, I was predisposed to see it repeated in subsequent conflicts, right down to the Cold War. History was a tale of almost uniformly disastrous wars between closed societies, like the Spartans', which celebrated military virtues, and democratic ones, like the Athenians', which fought reluctantly for the art and music and poetry as well as the democracy which their superior civilization was able to generate. It was not altogether satisfactory as historical pattern, and it made me deeply pessimistic about the Cold War, in which, nonetheless, I was convinced I was on the right side. But it still seems to me to be not a bad way for children to be taught to look at the world.

Naturally, Hillyer was an admirer of Pericles—the more so because "he was not a king nor a ruler,"

> but he was so very wise and such a wonderful speaker and such a popular leader that he was

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> able to make the Athenians do as he thought best. He was like the popular captain of a football team, who is a fine player himself and can make fine players of all the others on his team. Athens was his team, and he trained it so well that any one of the team would have been able to fill any position no matter how important it was.

I thought again of this description when I read Donald Kagan's new biography of the great Athenian general and statesman. Here is the *Boy's Own* Pericles redivivus, which is why the book has attracted a certain number of sneers from that part of the scholarly community (by far the larger part) that no longer believes in heroes.

Kagan, obviously, *does* believe in heroes. His chapter headings—Aristocrat, Politician, Democrat, Soldier, Imperialist, Peacemaker, Visionary, Educator, Private Man, Statesman, Crisis Manager, Strategist, and Hero—advertise his purpose clearly enough. But his book is addressed to those of us who subscribe to the Hillyer school of history and not to the sort of priggish schoolmaster who, as Hegel says, proves that he himself is a better man than Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great because, unencumbered by the passion for conquest or fame, he "has not conquered Asia nor vanquished Darius and Porus, but enjoys life and allows others to enjoy it too."

Those words were quoted by Gertrude Himmelfarb in her Jefferson Lecture, given under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Humanities last month. The lecture was entitled "Of Heroes, Villains, and Valets." In it she made the case for a return to a heroic conception of history from the *Annales* or structuralist variety—or any of the other sub-species of historical determinism according to which nothing that any individual does makes much difference in the overall scheme of things. Kagan's book is an instructive case study for those who would answer her call.

For one thing, you must pick the right hero. Neither Alexander nor Julius Caesar is as satisfactory from this point of view as Pericles: his identification with Athenian democracy makes him more attractive to us than the kind of Spartan hero likely to be struck on the mental medals of *Mitteleuropa*. Kagan, like Hillyer, associates Athens with the peace-loving, maritime Anglo-Saxon democracies and reminds us that during the First World War there were displayed passages from Pericles's Funeral Oration on signs in London buses: passages which, he says, "had contemporary meaning for the citizens of a modern liberal, commercial democracy at war with a militaristic autocracy."

The Funeral Oration was delivered in 431 B.C., shortly after the Peloponnesian War began in earnest. It is central to Kagan's understanding of what Pericles was about and why he remains a hero—not because he had no faults but because his vision of what the idea of Athens meant in the context of his time is still an inspiring and sustaining one. "The real source of his city's undying fame was Pericles' unique and original vision of the good society and the good citizen." Kagan compares the oration to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as an attempt to explain to a war-weary people why a system of government and social organization may be something worth dying for. "Above all," he writes in his final assessment, "Pericles convinced the Athenians that their private needs, both moral and material, required the kind of community Athens had become. Therefore, they were willing to run risks in its defense, make sacrifices on its behalf, and restrain their passions and desires to preserve it." There can be no higher task for any leader than that.

Of course Pericles includes the fact that "all the good things of the earth flow into our city because of its greatness," but part of what makes up that greatness is that

> the same people are concerned both with their own private business and with political matters; even those who turn their attention chiefly to their own affairs do not lack judgment about politics. We alone regard the man who takes no part in politics not as someone who minds his

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> own business but as useless. And we decide public questions ourselves, or at least come to a sound understanding of them.

"We alone" reminds us both of the rarity and preciousness of democracy in human history and of the extent to which Pericles embodied the earliest form of it that has come down to us. He speaks with pride as "not a king or a ruler" but an Athenian—an equal among equals but one who has earned the right to speak of himself and his city as one: "we alone."

And it is easy for us to forget just how alone they were. Kagan means to remind us. "Although in our time democracy is taken for granted," he writes, "it is in fact one of the rarest, most delicate and fragile flowers in the jungle of human experience." The condition of perpetual rivalry and frequent warfare among the Greek city states had created a military ethos of many centuries' standing which was dominated by a conception of honor that allowed little glory to anything but bravery in battle and victory over one's enemies. Perhaps the greatest of Pericles's achievements was to persuade his people that there is also an honor in peace. And we are even more likely to forget how rare a thing that is in the ancient world, how important it is for the survival through the intervening ages of all that we value most in the late twentieth century.

This newly conceived, nonmilitary sort of glory, says Kagan, was to be found partly

> in a quality of life unknown elsewhere, a range of activities that brought the pleasures of prosperity to the appetite, joy and wonder to the spirit, stimulation to the intellect, and pride to the soul. Another substitution for the glories of war could be found in the exercise by each Athenian of his political duties. These were evidence of his freedom and importance, and so a source of pride. . . . During the war, even in its darkest moments, Pericles could count on a strong response when he reminded the people that they were right to love their city and even to risk their lives for it, because it was uniquely great.

To read Pericles's appeal to this pride today is like being introduced to the genius who invented the wheel: even if he did not fully recognize the importance of what he had done, there is no excuse for our not doing so. A century later Demosthenes looked back upon the Periclean age as being "more avid for glory than for anything else"—because of the buildings they had built as well as the enemies they had conquered.

Kagan ends his book with what has really been implicit throughout it: a discussion of the relevance of Pericles's example to the modern world and especially to those for whom democracy is new enough to be built with the memory of its alternatives in mind. Kagan sees it as vitally important that Athenian democracy "exalted the individual *within* the political community; it limited the scope and power of the state, leaving enough space for individual freedom, privacy, and the human dignity of which they are a crucial part." Above all "it rejected the leveling principle pursued by both ancient Sparta and modern socialism, which requires the suppression of those rights. By rewarding merit, it encouraged the individual achievement and excellence that makes life sweet and raises the quality of life for everyone." As the new democracies of Eastern Europe and Latin America look to us for an example, we look to the vision of Pericles.

Those who have lost the power to be inspired by that vision may have done so because of Athenian imperialism or slave-owning or because of the limitation of the franchise, or because Pericles himself may have been no paragon. Kagan does not ignore his hero's limitations but sees them as they are: the qualities of a tragic figure whose very greatness contains within it the seeds of his eventual destruction. Yet in the end we cannot doubt that his life has made a difference—not only to the ancient Athenians but to us as well. That is the true test of a hero.

Kagan also sees what too many of both his and Pericles's critics have lost sight of: the fact that modern political theory is essentially

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utopian in conception and does not have to come to terms with the twilit, Hobbesian world out of which real civilizations arise and back into which they are always threatened with falling. As old Lycurgus would have said, "I told you so." But V. M. Hillyer taught me what Kagan also teaches: that so long as there is still anything in our past worth preserving we should venerate its history—if only to be reminded occasionally that, as Edgar tells his father, Gloucester, in *King Lear*, "thy life's a miracle."

The art of the deal

Lee Hall Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector. Abrams, 192 pages, $39.95

reviewed by Deborah Solomon

No American art dealer has a better reputation than Betty Parsons. By the time of her death, in 1982, she had come to be regarded as an emblematic figure, as much for her astuteness in recognizing new artists as for her famous inability to hold onto them. Her best discoveries always seemed to be leaving her, and the fault was entirely her own; at business, she was nearly hopeless. Parsons managed to keep her gallery afloat for a full three decades—it opened in the fall of 1946, at 15 East Fifty-seventh Street, and in 1963 moved across Fifth Avenue, to 24 West Fifty-seventh Street, where it remained until 1978—but today when we think of the Parsons Gallery, we tend to think of one specific moment, of the dramatic period around 1950, when most of the Abstract Expressionists belonged to the gallery and were painting the pictures that would set art history on its ear.

Parsons was an appealing woman. An artist herself who first turned to art dealing to help pay the bills, she gave off an impression of purity and conviction. Even by the standards of the Forties and Fifties, obviously a less commercial time than now, she seemed different from the other dealers: Peggy Guggenheim, the heiress whose sexcapades sound like something out of a trashy movie, or Charles Egan, a notorious drunkard who would leave his gallery unattended and unlocked for hours at a time, or Sidney Janis, a prototype of the Eighties corporate raider. Each of these characters had their virtues, but Parsons, by contrast, seemed to exemplify virtue. She was the consummate dealer of the old New York avant-garde, a woman with a keen and adventurous eye guided by the imperatives of her own taste rather than those of the marketplace.

Now Lee Hall has written the first biography of Parsons, which is both a pleasure and a disappointment to read. Hall comes to this project with high credentials; she is a former president of the Rhode Island School of Design, and has written trenchant articles about art. She was a friend of Parsons, exhibited paintings at her gallery in the Seventies, and had her subject's complete cooperation in the writing of this book (she started it when Parsons was still alive). All of this prepares the reader for an informed and even sophisticated biography that will provide great insight into Parsons, her gallery, and her era.

But this is not the book Hall has written. For starters, *Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector* is glaringly incomplete. Basic information is missing. The reader is never told, for instance, that Parsons gave Lee Krasner and Robert Rauschenberg their first one-man shows. Other influential artists whom Parsons exhibited—from Joseph Cornell in the Forties to Agnes Martin in the Sixties—receive no more than passing mention. Also unsettling is Hall's glib and hasty treatment of the Abstract Expressionists, whom she dubs "The Giants." (Giants throw rocks or footballs, not paint.) It can be said without exaggeration that the book adds very little to what has already been reported about the gallery, mainly by Calvin Tomkins, while inexplicably failing to draw on existing material. One particularly misses Clement Greenberg's famous characterization of the gallery as "a place where art goes on and is not just bought and sold."

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On the other hand, one suspects that Hall didn't set out to write a proper critical examination of her subject so much as a lively life story; and at this, she has succeeded. In her book, Parsons is depicted as an admirable champion of contemporary art, but also as a selfish and immature woman who lived completely for the thrill of the moment. The reader sees her metamorphose from a decorous young debutante into a free-spirited lesbian who calls herself an artist yet lacks the drive to produce serious work; mostly she just wants to travel, go to parties, and play tennis. We learn, too, of the "Katinkas," Parsons's nickname for a group of wealthy childhood friends, conventional matrons all, who underwrote her gallery and kept her solvent decade after decade for reasons that are not entirely clear; perhaps it was simply that she was a little more alive than the others and struck them as an alluring figure.

By the way, an exhibition of Parsons's late work was held last February at the Jack Tilton Gallery in Manhattan. It brought together about a dozen wooden sculptures from the Seventies, plus a hundred or so painted rocks displayed on the floor with an engaging casualness. Parsons's sculptures are as accessible and craftsy as her painted rocks. They consist of pieces of driftwood arranged into geometric configurations and painted with simple designs, and have the cheerful, untutored look of something from a kindergarten classroom. This seems appropriate, for Parsons could be childish. In Hall's biography she emerges as demanding, headstrong, incapable of subordination—in many ways the exact opposite of the nurturing muse of legend.

Born Betty Bierne Pierson in New York in 1900, Parsons came from an affluent, conservative family. Her father was a Wall Street broker and heir to an industrial-machinery fortune; her mother was a belle from New Orleans. It was inconceivable to this couple that their daughter would grow up to be anything other than a New York hostess, and to prepare her for this exalted destiny they sent her to Miss Chapin's School and saw to it that she was literate and could speak a little French. That was all the education she got. When she asked if she could attend Bryn Mawr, her parents refused; they didn't approve of college for women.

She left home as soon as she could. Her ticket to independence came in the form of a husband, a socialite ten years her senior named Schuyler Livingston Parsons. He turned out to be an alcoholic, and that was the least of the newlyweds' problems. In 1922, after two years of marriage, Parsons went to Paris to file for divorce. She ended up staying eleven years, during which time she studied sculpture with Antoine Bourdelle and Ossip Zadkine and became part of the expatriate community that flourished in Europe in the years between the two world wars. She got to know many of the more interesting people, including Alexander Calder, Man Ray, Isamu Noguchi, Josephine Baker, Alberto Giacometti, Max Jacob, Tristan Tzara, and Gertrude Stein.

One wonders whether Parsons ever ran into Peggy Guggenheim during her stint abroad. The two women had somewhat similar backgrounds. They were born in New York within two years of each other, grew up rich and miserable, and claimed to have acquired their interest in art after attending the Armory Show, in 1913. They both went to Paris in the Twenties to escape their oppressive families. Yet their experiences abroad differed fundamentally. Guggenheim quickly found her way to the center of the European avant-garde, and stayed there. Parsons, by contrast, didn't forge any lasting friendships with the Dadaists or the Surrealists, perhaps because the cynicism and provocation in which they specialized was foreign to her nature. And so it isn't surprising that in the Forties (to jump ahead in the story), when they each opened their galleries on Fifty-seventh Street, Guggenheim concentrated on the European avant-garde and Parsons on its American counterpart.

Lee Hall's biography contains many photographs that haven't been published before, and among them is a wonderful snapshot taken in Brittany in the Twenties. It shows

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Parsons sitting on the prow of a fishing boat on a cool, breezy day. A beret is pulled down over her forehead—she's the image of the expatriate life. Yet her expression is solemn, even a bit fearful, and she's clutching a small black terrier against her side. Parsons was a reluctant bohemian, and Europe for her was essentially a diversion. In 1933, after her family's money dwindled to almost nothing and her funds were cut off, she headed back to the States.

Parsons began her career as an art dealer on a modest scale, and spent a decade working for other dealers before starting her own gallery. Her story is, in part, about how she slowly learned to recognize the best art. Her first job was at the Midtown Gallery, where she sold pictures on a commission basis and exhibited her own impressionistic landscapes, which can safely be described as run-of-the-mill. Next she had a job with Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art and the owner of a gallery on Park Avenue that specialized in Irish and modern painting. The turning point in her career was perhaps in 1940, when she was asked to start a small gallery in the basement of the Wakefield Bookshop. While at first she exhibited the work of book illustrators, before long she was giving shows to Joseph Cornell, Saul Steinberg, and Adolph Gottlieb. Her reputation for recognizing new talent spread, and in 1944, Mortimer Brandt, a dealer in Old Masters, hired her to start a modern division in his gallery; two years later, Brandt moved and Parsons took over the space.

It has often been noted (with undue snideness) that Peggy Guggenheim availed herself of excellent advice. The same is true of Betty Parsons. One of her closest friends was Barnett Newman, whom she had met at the home of Adolph Gottlieb in 1944, and it was probably at his urging that she began to look seriously at the work of the Abstract Expressionists. Parsons had the good fortune to open her gallery just as Peggy Guggenheim was closing hers, and she fell heir to many of Guggenheim's artists, among them Pollock, Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Theodoros Stamos, Hans Hofmann, Clyfford Still, Herbert Ferber, and Richard Pousette-Dart. If Guggenheim gave most of these artists their first shows, Parsons showed them when they were doing their most important work. So much of the art of the past four decades has grown out of the early exhibitions at the Parsons Gallery that one has to strain to imagine their originality and history-making importance. There's no gallery like it today.

Not everyone Parsons admired was first-rate. Far from it. She saw nothing wrong with giving shows to her many friends and lovers, though she at least had the judgment to relegate their work to the gallery's back room. Lee Hall's book includes an appendix with a complete listing of the gallery's exhibitions, and it makes for unexpectedly entertaining reading. Featured are such odd couples as "Mark Rothko/Sonia Sekula," "Barnett Newman/Marie Taylor," and "Ad Reinhardt/Marjorie Liebman." Parsons's stable eventually became so overrun with mediocrities that she had to start a second gallery next door just to supply adequate exhibition space; in 1958, she opened Section Eleven, an administrative mess that closed after four years.

In later years, Parsons was often asked why the Abstract Expressionists all left her gallery (with the exception of Reinhardt and Pousette-Dart, who remained loyal almost to the end). In reply, she would recall an occasion in 1953 when the painters showed up at her apartment and demanded that she drop about thirty artists they considered below par, meaning everyone but them. When she refused, they abandoned her. It was a nice story, with its implications of satanic arrogance on the part of the painters, yet the truth wasn't quite so pat. Parsons was a lackadaisical dealer. She didn't advertise, made little effort to cultivate collectors, and would disappear for weeks at a time on trips abroad. She was scattered and uncommunicative. For all of these reasons she was easy prey for Sidney Janis—who, in 1952, opened a gallery across the hall from hers and eventually took

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over her leading artists, as well as the space her gallery occupied.

While Parsons is best known for her affiliation with the Abstract Expressionists, perhaps not enough has been said about her promotion of more obscure and isolated artists. In the early Fifties, though committed wholeheartedly to the "make it new" ethos of that era, she managed to find time in her exhibition calendar for such offbeat talents as Anne Ryan, who took up collage in middle age, and Forrest Bess, an eccentric down in Texas who turned out pleasingly raw abstractions. Even in later years, when the gallery suffered a falling-off in quality, it continued to have a good many stellar exhibitions. On an average day there was no telling whether one might find unredeemable hack work or something genuinely inspired—say, work by Richard Lindner, Ellsworth Kelly, or Agnes Martin, all of whom, to Parsons's immense credit, had their first one-man shows with her.

Is there any way to explain the singular nature of Parsons's taste? This, alas, is one of the many questions that remain unanswered by Lee Hall, whose only musing on the subject is that Parsons was drawn to the new. Yet Parsons herself left more than a few clues as to what she admired in a work of art. In conversation, she often used the word "mystery," and there is something a bit comical about the frequency with which she relied on the buzz word to sum up a favorite career. Here she is on Hedda Sterne, for instance: "Hedda always painted the sources of mystery." Theodoros Stamos similarly had "that mysterious knowledge about what went on in nature that you can't see." Gottlieb's work is informed by the "secret forces of nature." Pollock, unsurprisingly, "had a sense of mystery." And so on.

What did all this mystery talk mean? Perhaps that Parsons was drawn to an art of spiritual aspiration, an art that hinted at something larger than itself. This is the reason she embraced Abstract Expressionism and abstract painting in general.

It also explains why she missed the boat on Pop art, that most unmysterious and unspiritual of art movements. Not one Pop artist ever made it into her gallery. In much the same way that Parsons was unswayed by the Dadaists during her years in France, she was indifferent when Dada was recycled in New York some four decades later under the name of Pop. As a result her gallery lost its edge in the Sixties. It was no longer "a place where art goes on," and its month-to-month happenings were no longer the stuff of art history. One suspects that didn't bother her too much. For all the artists she discovered, she refused to become a mere trend-spotter. She knew, among much else, that the best new art has a lot more going for it than newness.

Shock of the Hughes

Robert Hughes The Shock of the New. Knopf, 440 pages, $24.95 paper.
Nothing if Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists. Knopf, 429 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Tim Hilton

Television is the least discriminating of cultural forms, and one doesn't expect it to provide a sensitive account of the history of art. Nonetheless, small-screen films about painting and sculpture are quite numerous on the European side of the Atlantic: ambitious producers like to make them, for they carry prestige within the television business and can be surprisingly popular in the world at large. Some years ago, looking for a rival to Sir Kenneth Clark's acclaimed set of programs entitled "Civilisation," the British Broadcasting Corporation invited Robert Hughes to write and narrate eight hour-long scripts in which he would describe some of the themes of twentieth-century painting. His *Shock of the New* (first published in 1981 and now revised) both records and expands the text used for the series. It is a book, certainly, but its manner belongs to the original medium. Hughes had formidable qualifications for the television exercise. He is evi-

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dently no lover of study or reflection and he is not a popularizer. That is, he never gives the impression that he knows more than he is saying. Thus he avoids the *de-haut-en-bas* accent that many viewers found irritating in Clark (who, besides being a pioneer of commercial television, was a scholar and a genuinely cultivated man). Hughes is demotic, a pugnacious enthusiast for modern art. His regular readers know that there is something thrilling in his egotism. Self-portraiture was part of the television programs and it is also part of the book. Not that Hughes says enough about himself: it's just that *The Shock of the New* has a voice as well as a literary style, the tone of a man reading what he himself has written to be put on the teleprompter.

Hughes says that the separate chapters of *The Shock of the New* are about five times longer than their original scripts. I think that when he expanded them he entered difficult territory. The lengthier version opens Hughes to criticism from people who know more about, say, Matisse than he does. In fact his reliance on secondary sources shows that there is no topic in modern art about which he has particular and individual knowledge. But Hughes is a man who can put carping professors back in their places. No, the problem with the book as it now stands is that it bores the reader. Hughes the writer has a problem with the attention span of his audience. His opinions can be exhilarating, his explanations are usually dull. There is a pleasure to be found in reading instant and suprematist judgments. "The lingo of *avant-gardism* was brain-dead in English by the Eighties, but it survived in other languages, especially German." Bash! and on we go to the next subject. But the lingering impression is that Hughes's own lingo is enlivening in snatches, and that we would not wish to have any longer discussion—not from his pen—of the language of art criticism in different contemporary cultures.

Hughes published a book in Britain last year about the German-born immigrant painter Frank Auerbach, who lives in London. The text wasn't too long but it felt too long. Its meat was contained in an abbreviation published in *The New York Review of Books.* On the evidence of the pieces reprinted in *Nothing if Not Critical* (Hughes is silly to associate himself with Shakespeare's foulest and most designing villain), he loses force when his pieces extend beyond about four thousand words. So it is with many of us, but I worry that expatiation in Hughes's writing is effective only when he has shady dealings within his sights. Articles on the Rothko scandal, Berenson's elastic probity, and Warhol's public image are good from beginning to end. He has no clue about the true value of Rothko's painting—connoisseurship as a matter of high taste and visual acumen might have been invented by the Martians, as far as Hughes is concerned—but he has a sort of relish for impropriety, and the Warhol essay is carried along not only by impatience with this inadequate artist but also by social horror.

It has been Hughes's ill fortune to have covered art in New York during the Warhol period. Little wonder that there is so much scorn in his writing. But do we not detect a faint hint of rivalry when he describes Warhol? In 1982 Hughes deplored

> the shallow painter who understood more about the mechanisms of celebrity than any of his colleagues, whose entire sense of reality was shaped, like Reagan's sense of power, by the television tube. Each, in his way, coming on like Huck Finn; both obsessed with serving the interests of privilege. Together, they signify a new moment: the age of "supply-side" aesthetics.

Or are we meant to feel an equation between Huck and Australian-born Bob Hughes, who gives us just three or four tantalizing glimpses of his early life? We would like to know more about Hughes the celebrity because he is himself so "supply-side." Read these books, including the Auerbach monograph, and you still do not know which artists he treasures, only the artists of whom he approves. Conveniently, he supplies a list

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of them. They are Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Motherwell, Antoni Tàpies, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Arthur Boyd, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Ilya Kabakov, Avigdor Arikha, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Nancy Graves, William Tucker, Joel Shapiro, Frank Auerbach, Howard Hodgkin, R. B. Kitaj, Anselm Kiefer, Susan Rothenberg, Neil Jenney, Sean Scully, Elizabeth Murray, Martin Puryear, Tony Cragg, "and maybe one of two hopeful group events such as the collaboration of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival)."

The justice or otherwise of this list of artists is not an issue. The problem is that one cannot imagine Hughes writing a book in their praise. He—and they—might benefit if he wrote exhibition catalogues, for this is the purest form of appreciative criticism. But that would not be in his style. The muse of *Nothing if Not Critical* is no goddess of the liberal arts. Hughes's inspiration is decline. The folly of much art of the Eighties makes his prose crackle. However, he cannot provide a shape to our decline. (Nor, in fairness, can any other writer.) The most interesting chapter of *The Shock of the New* is, unusually for Hughes, helpless. It is entitled "The Future That Was" and its purpose is to cover the years since the book was first issued. The obligation to give historical form to the period defeats him. He also, in this chapter, fails to write convincingly about those very artists—Jenney, Kiefer, Scully, Hodgkin, et al.—whom he elsewhere asserts to be producing the best art of our time. He should write more considered pieces about them, and not in a book that purports to be history. We know that Hughes has a historical sense, for it is displayed in his book *The Fatal Shore*, which had nothing to do with art. Television gave Hughes his opportunity to become an inventive art historian and simultaneously ruined his chances in that area. It is the enemy of cultural history. With a touch of a button it can summon past events, but it cannot show that we are enriched by knowledge of them. Neither can Hughes. He is a tough victim, but a victim nonetheless.

Shorter notices

David Shapiro Mondrian: Flowers. Abrams, 80 pages, $29.95

Mondrian: Flowers is an album of some fifty-odd images of flowers—single stems mostly, plus a few bouquets—that the inventor of Neoplastic painting executed both before and for a while after he began his more than twenty years of total abstraction. It marks the first gathering of these flower images, which Mondrian never showed in public and which, indeed, were done, as he said, to earn the money that his abstract paintings could not. Into the essay which accompanies the pictures, the poet David Shapiro, who conceived the collection, admits this paraphrase of a Mondrian letter of 1921: "Mondrian tells a friend that he has rendered commissions for flowers '(naturalistic)' for 100 francs, and that if this kind of success continues he will stop painting!" This would suggest that Mondrian dismissed these works. Shapiro's essay, however, is an attempt to give a special, even a primary place to these flowers in Mondrian's oeuvre. They are the linchpin of Shapiro's argument for Mondrian the "libidinous poet."

The virtues and faults of this elegantly turned essay lie closely entwined. Shapiro has the artist's curiosity about the great artist, *all* of him; his desire to see Mondrian whole is sympathetic. Even if you don't accept Shapiro's premise that "no one who knows [the flowers] is not entranced by them" (and I don't: I think they are, for the most part, pretty bad painting), you might be able to accept his interest in them as an interest in an aspect of one of the greatest painters of the century. But when, at the beginning of the essay, he discounts Mondrian's own words —"One cannot go to the artist for the meanings of the flowers"—and then uses the words of critics, writers, art historians as touchstones throughout, one wonders where Mondrian has gone.

Shapiro pits Mondrian the flower painter against Mondrian the abstractionist. Taking the art historian Meyer Schapiro as his

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model, Shapiro means to find the emotion in the abstractions by "finding the [repressed] representation in the abstraction." But I'd say the poet misunderstands the process by which Schapiro studied Cézanne, or, for that matter, Mondrian himself. Meyer Schapiro looks at the greatest works of both and, in exploring their secreted psychological aspect, expresses his faith in the profound realization of those paintings. When David Shapiro suggests that the Neoplastic paintings are "forms of a gigantic controlling mechanism" that defended Mondrian against his own libido—which Shapiro finds fully expressed in the flowers—he is merely *preferring* the representation to the abstraction. And finally, when Shapiro uses Fairfield Porter's dreadful prejudice against Mondrian's total abstraction, or when (really following Porter and the New York School) he poses observed nature as the source of emotion in *all* painting, the essay wanders out of sight of the great Mondrian altogether.

Mondrian spent twenty years developing within the self-imposed conventions of Neoplasticism. In abstracting, Mondrian was not simply denying the emotion that figuration might bring into the work, he believed that emotions were made manifest in the abstract work and through very particular relations of process and structure. These carefully worked-out conventions constitute the "dogma" to which Shapiro often refers. Through simplifications like this one, Shapiro coarsens Mondrian's exquisite quest. Seeing the flowers as "prose," or as "empirical" additions to a world of rootless abstractions, doesn't help us to understand Mondrian's significant, favorable reference (in "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art") to Byzantine painting—a parallel *non-empirical* universe. By setting up straw men—geometry, the criticism of Clement Greenberg—Shapiro loses sight of the particular tensions that the great Mondrian paintings introduced into the world of form. Citing Wittgenstein and Kant as parallels to Mondrian's temperament, Shapiro fails to notice how limited is Mondrian's "geometry" compared to that of Kandinsky, or Taeuber-Arp, or Herbin, or Klee—or even Plato! What Mondrian offers is not mathematically or philosophically based geometry at all (except in the sense of the essential geometric divisions of the plane); he offers, rather, a continually mutable relation of reduced, immutable forms. Far from being the priest of a dogma, Mondrian ranks among the greatest of instinctual painters. Neoplastic composing is itself emotionally charged: how important it is to realize that Mondrian's Neoplastic compositions were totally improvised in the act of painting, were absolutely the effect of gut responses by the painter to the ineffable, elusive, totally irrational elements of shape, line, hue, scale. Given the possibilities of such a kingdom, would not many painters say, with Mondrian, *ça vaut quelques fleurs?*

—*Deborah Rosenthal*

Guy Cardwell The Man Who Was Mark Twain: Images and Ideologies. Yale University Press, 267 pages, $27.50

In *The Man Who Was Mark Twain*, Guy Cardwell, emeritus professor of English at Washington University, sets up a rather flimsy strawman and then knocks it down in a pugnacious show of Political Correctness. He argues that America is in serious danger of mistaking Mark Twain for an "American hero"—an ideal role model for the lives of her citizens. And before he will let that happen, Cardwell wants America to know what Twain was really like.

The "heroic" Mark Twain—the false image that Cardwell is at pains to demolish—is said to be the invention of various Twain critics and biographers who commend him as an "archetype of the national character," "the independent western hero," and "the type of a virtuous America." This Twain is the concoction of "Patriots," a sinister lot who have distorted Twain in order to acclaim the United States itself. Cardwell says that when Twain is presented "in this favorable light, he stands as an aspect of the *Volksgeist*, a product of the generative and regenerating frontier, a figure representative of the genius

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of a democratic people. He is a homespun Diderot, a vernacular defender of the rights of man."

It is true that William Dean Howells affectionately remembered Twain as "the Lincoln of our literature," and that Bernard DeVoto, Twain's literary executor back in the 1930s, thought that Twain incarnated "the spirit of unspoiled democracy." But today we live in the age of "Victim Studies," and Cardwell's life is designed to join the bandwagon and show that Twain is in fact "insensitive" on matters of race, class, and gender. Cardwell thus presents Twain as a basket case of neuroses marked by "vanity, oscillation between megalomania and paranoia, hypochondria, short-lived rages, moments of ebullience, periods of emotional depletion, exaggerated expressions of guilt," &c., &c. If Twain seemed to condemn the excesses of capitalism, says Cardwell, he really toadied to the rich, lusted after Mammon, speculated wildly, and pauperized his family. Far from being a friend to blacks, moreover, he was a patent racist; in his relations with women, he was a paternalistic, sexist pig. Besides, Twain was infantile, impotent, and hankered after the company of prepubescent girls. Even Twain's jokes aren't funny, since they betray the racist, sexist, and elitist aggression of a disturbed personality. One can hardly recognize America's greatest comic genius in Cardwell's profile:

> He was childish, malicious, excessively ambitious, self-indulgent, destructive, vulgar, sentimental, exploitative, rationalist, skeptical, atheistic, mechanistic, antiaristocratic, and elitist. He fantasized the possession of enormous power and of wealth beyond measure. He suffered from bitterness, terror, guilt, and despair.

Yet frankly there is nothing new in the news Cardwell pretends to bring. More than seventy years ago Van Wyck Brooks, in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920), said all of this and said it much more strikingly. And, in the intervening years, Lewis Leary, Justin Kaplan, Hamlin Hill, and many other biographers and critics have filled out Brooks's portrait of a deeply divided author whose emotional instability and wild conflict bordered, certainly in the final years, on madness. What, then, is the point of rehashing the old Brooks-DeVoto controversy and debunking Twain anew?

I do not sense the public's readiness to accept Twain as an archetype of the American hero. Nor does anyone of my acquaintance seem disposed to model his life on Twain's. The very notion that anyone nowadays is advancing him as the model of an American hero is arrant nonsense. So what do we do with this brilliant writer, whose works have delighted generations of readers? Since Twain is crudely insensitive to the PC position on race, gender, and class, Cardwell wants to read him out of the pantheon of literary greatness. Yet there remains that extraordinary gift. I for one want to keep Twain for a while, warts and all.

—James W. Tuttleton

Robert Adam Classical Architecture: A Comprehensive Handbook to the Tradition of Classical Style. Illustrations by Derek Brentnall. Abrams, 319 pages, $45

There has been no ceremony to mark the passing of Postmodernism in architecture, but its tombstones are all around us. You can tell it's had better days when you see those paste-on Doric columns and pink stucco arches on small-town banks and highway rest-stops.

But the demise of PM should not put anyone off the value of the Classical sources that its most commercial practitioners annexed with often cynical abandon. If anything, the collapse of the movement should make the enduring freshness of the authentic Classical principles on which it was so loosely based even more inviting.

Robert Adam's *Classical Architecture: A Comprehensive Handbook to the Tradition of Classical Style*, which was published in Britain last year by Viking and has been reissued in this country by Abrams, should be a cause for celebration among those who are hoping to hack their way back to architectural basics

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through the eclectic excesses of Philip Johnson, Robert A. M. Stern, Michael Graves & Co. If the result is less pleasing than one had hoped, it is at least partly because the book's putative purpose of introducing Classicism to the lay person is undercut by an ill-concealed eagerness to denigrate any form of architecture that is *not* Classicism—especially Modernism. "A small but growing number of architects have returned to the classical tradition," writes Adam toward the beginning of his book, "but the Modern Movement still dominates the artistic and architectural establishment. The weight of three thousand years of popular artistic tradition has, however, sufficient energy to overcome fifty years of cultural dictatorship."

Such aesthetically doctrinaire statements appear less frequently as Adam proceeds, but their rigidity is reflected in both his organization and his style. The book devotes a one-page essay to each of 145 topics, and provides on each facing page a selection of illustrative drawings. But while one page may suffice for "The Acanthus" as a source of decorative detail, it is hardly adequate for a consideration of "Renaissance and Baroque Churches." Whatever the space allocation, this relentlessly symmetrical approach inevitably produces a numbing uniformity among the entries.

The impact of the book's structure is not much mitigated by Adam's prose, which rarely rises above the wooden. A typical entry begins: "As times have changed, buildings have had to change." We know this. We also know that "animals in many different forms appear in classical decoration."

All of which is not to say that Adam's book is without merit. He clearly knows his stuff, and, if you can stay alert, you are bound to learn a good deal from him. While rigid, the organization makes for handy access to the information. The crisply elegant drawings, by Derek Brentnall, are almost worth the price of admission (although it seems more than a bit self-serving to include one of the author's buildings in a book that deals with the likes of Brunelleschi and Michelangelo).

What makes this handsome volume on enduring architectural verities especially hard to embrace is the nagging suspicion that the author—who is described as having been trained in Modernism, only to "discover" Classicism—assembled this handbook less to inform than to counterattack. Modernism may have needed "master builders" to advance its cause, and Postmodernism may have needed public relations experts to keep it alive; one of the many beauties of Classicism is that the architecture speaks for itself.

—*Carter Wiseman*

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of two new books of poems, *The Gods of Winter* by Dana Gioia (Graywolf Press, $22.95; $9.95 paper) and *A Guest on Mild Evenings* by Charles Edward Eaton (Cornwall Books, $15.95). Some of the contents of these collections first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Notebook

Orphans of utopia

by Mark Falcoff

Suppose they gave a Latin American revolution and nobody came? Well, from April 4 to 9 the people came, but the revolution never quite got off the ground. The scene was not Bolivia, Peru, or El Salvador, but the Hyatt-Regency in Crystal City, Virginia, where 2,500 people gathered for the Sixteenth International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA). Founded twenty-five years ago, LASA is very much a child of the Sixties. At previous meetings this much was obvious in details small as well as large. The uniform of choice tended to be radical fancy-dress (jeans and boots for both sexes; long, unkempt hair likewise; grubby native accessories); the principal activities were revolutionary theater and political posturing, the regnant ideology an undifferentiated mixture of Marxism, anarchism, and anti-Americanism.

This year, however, some things were different. Suits, ties, and dresses were everywhere in evidence. ("This is the first year," one Chilean academic mumbled, "that the women look like *women*.") Voices were low and so, by the way, were the energy levels. Civility was the order of the day: there were no catcalls or jeers at Bernard Aronson, who addressed a large meeting in his capacity as the State Department's chief Latin American policy official. Even two American army officers at a panel on low-intensity conflict in El Salvador escaped unscathed.

Not that *everything* has changed: in the race for LASA's presidency, Marxist economist Carmen Deere (of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and also of farm-machinery fame), an adviser to the Cuban and Sandinista governments, defeated the "liberal" candidate, William Leogrande of American University (but who also likes the Cubans and the Sandinistas). But probably not too much should be made of this: while the program this year confirmed that Latin American studies remains in many ways a "left" or even, in places, a "far left" field, it is gradually but perceptibly becoming less so. Still there were examples of the old animus. For example, Beth Sims of the Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center assured a roundtable on the 1990 Nicaraguan elections that the United States had virtually "bought" the victory of Violeta Chamorro —this in spite of the fact that, as Charles Lane of *Newsweek* pointed out from the floor, it was obvious to any observer that the Sandinistas outspent UNO at least three to one.

The Old Faith was also manifest in dozens of booths representing a wide range of radical and revolutionary causes, including the vicious Shining Path guerrilla movement in Peru (cheek-by-jowl with the Fulbright Commission!), and various organizations who make and distribute radical films. Nonetheless, the auditorium-sized room where some of these films were on continuous display was often completely empty. This could serve well as a metaphor for the conference as a whole: much of the traditional menu was available, but appetites were a bit tepid.

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Part of what's happening here is that the greening of academia is turning to the graying: as in other fields, the current generation in Latin American studies is getting older, and—given the coming economic crunch in higher education—probably will not be replaced. With fewer jobs available teaching, say, Andean history at Fort Gloch State College, potential graduate students are going instead to law school or for their MBA. A kind of middle-age calm, combined with a soupçon of ideological exhaustion, has settled over LASA's membership, and thus over its deliberations.

But there is something else that accounts for the shift and that was very much in evidence at the LASA conference: the Latin American intellectuals themselves have changed their world views. The point is an important one, because as a field Latin American studies has always had a strong sense of constituency—Americans who wrote about the area often did so with an eye to the approval of their foreign colleagues. In the Sixties and Seventies, in fact, no North American (in the social sciences at least) could move successfully in Latin intellectual circles without incorporating at least partly the reigning orthodoxies, including the superiority of central planning to the market, the superficiality (not to say the perversity) of "bourgeois democracy," and the United States as the first cause of all the evils that afflicted the Southern hemisphere.

Over the past two years, however, the Left in Latin America has been profoundly shaken by the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the revelations of *glasnost*. At the same time, in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil a process of reflection and self-examination that began long before Gorbachev's innovations has led to the embrace of democracy as a positive value in itself, not merely a gimmick to be manipulated in the service of other social or economic goals. As for the United States, never has its stock in the region been higher, especially among democratic socialists and social-democrats, many of whom have personally benefited from Washington's unambiguous support for democratic transitions, and the persistent curiosity of our Congress in the matter of human rights performance.

The result at Crystal City was a muted but discernible confrontation between the Latin American Left and their long-time counterparts in the American academy. Entirely emblematic of this phenomenon was a session on the first year of Chile's newly elected government, where Sergio Bitar, President Allende's former minister of mines, courteously but firmly took issue with two American *marxisant* academics, one of whom had grandly declared that what Bitar's country had was not a democratic government at all but "a military government administered by civilians."

The real moment of truth occurred at a session which brought together three Soviet scholars of Latin America to discuss the impact of *perestroika* on their field of study. The first two papers were full of anodyne generalities. The quiet buzz of platitudes was suddenly interrupted by the third speaker, Vladimir Stanchenko from the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow. Reading his paper in excellent American-accented English, Stanchenko tore into the entire course of Soviet policy in Latin America for the last three decades. It was no secret, he confided to the audience, that since the Cuban revolution the Soviet Union sought to exploit unrest in Latin America as a way of "weakening U.S. interests and constraining Washington's global position." This is what led both Soviet military planners and ideologists to establish a military and naval presence in Cuba (which he called "a hostage to Soviet military power"). Later on, euphoric with the "strategic parity" achieved with the United States after Vietnam, Brezhnev purposely increased tensions in the region as a way of "harassing the sleeping giant, the United States." Among other things, Brezhnev used "the dictatorship in Cuba" to manage and direct Third World movements and also to advance Soviet interests in the English-speaking Caribbean (Grenada and Guyana), a

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region to which he, Brezhnev, "attributed great importance."

As for Central America itself, Stanchenko observed that there could be "little doubt" of a Soviet involvement through Cuba: Nicaragua's military build-up under the Sandinistas, as well as arms, assistance, and advice to the FMLN and "other Marxist groupings," bore witness to Soviet involvement. In effect, until recently Soviet policy in Central America "has contributed unnecessarily to the deterioration of relations with the United States," while working to impose "totalitarian regimes" in hapless Third World countries.

There it was—everything down to the T-word! When Stanchenko finished, it seemed as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. Hands rose rapidly. "What you are saying," gasped one woman, "is what the Right in the United States has been saying for some time"—which, as far as it went, was certainly a valid observation. Another demanded to know if Stanchenko had been born before 1959—surely not all of these events in the region began only when the Soviets put their hands into the pot. Then one man in the first row stood up and said, "When President Reagan called the Soviet Union 'the evil empire,' some of us tried to explain to our classes that the Soviet Union wasn't like that at all. Now, however, we hear voices from the Soviet Union repeating arguments of the extreme Right in the United States." Then, moving in for the kill, he said, "Don't you people have something of a problem of credibility? Why should I believe you now? Were you telling the truth before, when you wrote in a very different vein?" (Scattered but determined applause.)

Stanchenko assured the audience that he had indeed been born before 1959—"that's why I know more about some of these things than many of you here." As to his own credibility, he informed the audience that he had only begun to publish since *perestroika*. "Other colleagues may have written the opposite." Nonetheless, he went on, he could very specifically affirm that Soviet arms shipments to the region occurred before Ronald Reagan came to power in the United States. "Either you believe the facts—or you don't believe the facts."

Perhaps the most characteristic response came not from the hard Left but from the soft. "I am concerned about the United States as an international police force for hire, and the Soviet Union not able to do anything about it," one voice from the back of the room wailed. "What will it mean for world peace?" Wasn't the Cold War, with all its warts, better at least in that way? Stanchenko didn't think the Cold War was all that good for world peace. There were discontented rumbles as the session broke up; the speakers were surrounded by angry academics. When Stanchenko finally broke free to go to lunch, he was heard to remark to an American colleague, "Well, I have to tell the truth, don't I? What else can I do?"

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Letters

The new "Karamazov"

To the Editors:

In his review of our translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* (March 1991), Vasily Rudich takes the "unfashionable position" that "style in a work of literature is subordinate to the message." All the more so, it may be assumed, in a work of non-literature—fortunately for Professor Rudich, whose message concerning the "failures and flaws" of our translation is then free to soar above the bromides, weary reviewerisms, and dying metaphors in which he expresses it.

"To their credit," he writes, for example, "[the translators] have escaped the temptation to modernize Dostoevsky's language and to embroider it with current slang." (To our credit? But we didn't "escape" the temptation; we simply never felt it.) However, grateful though he is for this hypothetical escape, the "native speaker of Russian" nevertheless feels that our choice of words and phrases could have been bolder "without compromising the fabric of English." That "uncompromised fabric" is good, but Professor Rudich can do better: "The many merits of the new translation notwithstanding, the novel's innumerable literary gems are bound to remain unfathomable and unsuspected by the reader who is innocent of Russian." This same unsuspecting reader, if he gets as far as "The Grand Inquisitor," is going to find himself beset by "a familiar host of problems." But there's no help for it, since the frustrated state in which our translation leaves both the reader innocent of Russian and the reviewer guilty of it, arises "not because the translators lacked talent or diligence. It arises rather from the impossibility of the task." Here the bromide starts to fizz; a moment later it foams over: "This is the reason that the new—and, for that matter, any other—translation necessarily falls short of what we would wish. There is no way around it: One must master Russian to enjoy the novel in full." No, really? Who would have thought it? Or, failing that, read Professor's Terras's commentary? Instead? But that is not quite the whole of the message.

Our translation has received a fair share of attention in the press. There have been some silly things in the reviews (one of which was accompanied by a full-page photograph of Lev Tolstoy—Tolstoevsky, indeed!), but we have not thought it necessary to respond to them. Even the woolly logic of a review that speaks of our "failure" to do the "impossible" would not have drawn us out. But at the very end of his review Professor Rudich slips in a little theory of his own—much as Raskolnikov did at the end of his article on crime—just a hint, a suggestion, but a remarkable one. To this we could not help responding.

Viewing things from his unfashionable position, Professor Rudich notes that, while "no amount of skill can produce a translation (into any tongue) that does full justice to Dostoevsky's innovative and idiosyncratic rhetoric," nevertheless "Dostoevsky's message . . . has been transmitted across languages, nations, and races around the world and has profoundly influenced our century's cultural and psychological landscape." Then comes the little theory: "*By excessive concentration on the aspects of form, lesser talent often undercuts both the appeal and the availability of his*

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work." There, set in our italics, is an unfathomable gem for you! But no, let us try to fathom it. Take, for instance, the word "often." How "often" has lesser talent been guilty of "an excessive concentration on the aspects of form" in translating Dostoevsky? We alone would seem to be the offenders here. Does the "often" then refer to the number of our offenses? That we are "lesser talent" we won't dispute ("lesser" than Dostoevsky, presumably), but how much more "lesser" would one have to be in order not to "undercut the appeal and availability" of Dostoevsky's work? Professor Rudich says several times that our translation is "superior to previous efforts," though still not bold enough. Yet it was these previous, less bold efforts that sent Dostoevsky's message racing around the world (*sic?*), profoundly influencing the landscape, while ours, owing to its superiority, undercuts the appeal and availability of his work. Isn't that remarkable? It's a paradox, of the real "Russian" sort—"smoke, mist, a string twanging in the mist," as Porfiry Petrovich says of Raskolnikov's little article. (*Crime and Punishment* is on our minds because, alas, we have just applied our lesser talent to it, and our publisher will soon be undercutting that work's availability as well.)

Having produced his little wind-egg of a theory, Professor Rudich takes wing at last, calling down to us one final, ear-splitting apothegm: "But a work of true genius transcends every formal limitation, even that of language, and arrives at the universal."

Prolonged applause.

Richard Pevear
Larissa Volokhonsky
Yerres, France

Vasily Rudich replies:

I am saddened and surprised by the angry tone of Richard Pevear's and Larissa Volokhonsky's letter. I believed—as it turned out, mistakenly—that I had written a favorable review of their translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. At one point I declared that their achievement is "nearly heroic." If they think that it is even grander than that, such is their privilege, constitutionally guaranteed. Similarly, if they consider the style of their own letter superior to my "bromides" and "weary reviewerisms," they are entitled to do so.

I pass over most of their effusions, and will only say that as regards the last paragraph of my piece their furor is misguided. In speaking of "lesser talent," I did not mean *them*—nor, for that matter, any other translators. Indeed, the idea of comparing the talent of *any* translator to Dostoevsky is preposterous. The "lesser talents" I had in mind were numerous modernist artists who reduce the essence of art to formal experimentation. A good example of this may be found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor*. While certainly a lesser talent than Dostoevsky, Nabokov is still a master stylist; but in translation, or deprived of clever puns and literary games, *Ada, or Ardor* would offer little to a discriminating reader.

I wish Pevear and Volokhonsky and their publisher the best of luck with *Crime and Punishment*. But I shall withhold my own "prolonged applause" until I see the result of their new labors. I hope it will be as worthy as their previous effort—or, at least, that it will be worthier than their present excursion into the epistolary genre.

"The New Shostakovich"

To the Editors:

Donald F. McCabe's response (April 1991) to Samuel Lipman's review of *The New Shostakovich* (February 1991) overlooks a central problem of Shostakovich's art. One need only consider the exuberant, puckish, and inventive Symphony no. 1 (1926) to relish what the composer might have produced had he not suffered the meddling of crass ideologues. To suggest that the political climate of Stalinist Russia somehow spurred the hapless composer on to greatness not only relies upon an over-estimation of his later, tormented work, but reiterates the usual, tiresome emphasis of the political conditions of artistic production over aesthetics.

While Shostakovich's work did indeed flourish to some degree *despite* Stalinist tyranny, I suspect that *because of* that tyranny his work did not flourish to its full potential. And, I should add, it hardly matters whether his work was a straight or ironic response to Stalin's bullying; either way the bullying, and not the composer's artistic instincts, prompted the response. If anything, Stalin's reign of terror can only be credited with having harassed

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and embittered one of the most gifted composers of this century.

Richard H. Branyan
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN

George Gissing

To the Editors:
As a longtime admirer of George Gissing, I wish to protest against the ignorant condescension (to borrow a phrase) displayed toward Gissing by Donald Lyons in *The New Criterion* (March 1991). While I would not rate Gissing as the equal of Dickens, Thackeray, or Trollope, he was certainly not, as Lyons seems to imply, another Bulwer-Lytton who wrote only one good book. Besides *New Grub Street*, Gissing wrote, among other works, *The Nether World*, *Born in Exile*, *The Odd Women*, *In the Year of the Jubilee*, and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. These books are, in my opinion and that of many other people, eminently worth reading. They are not, at any rate, "hack work" produced by an author who had a "minor" career.

J. Kevin Branigan
Rochester, NY

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

We should also like to inform our readers that, owing to the recent increase in postal costs, *The New Criterion* will raise its cover price and subscription rates on September 1, 1991. Subscription orders postmarked before that date will be honored at the current rates.

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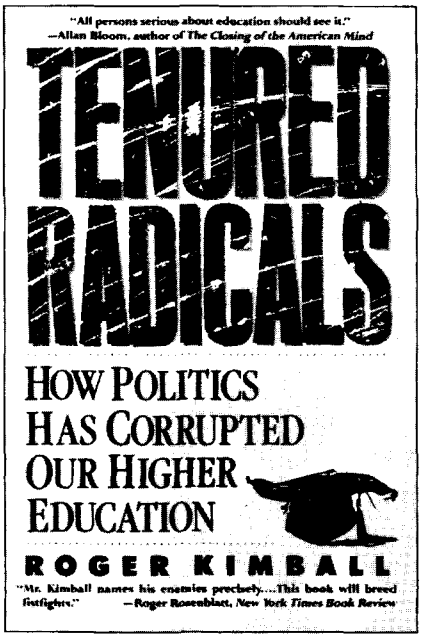
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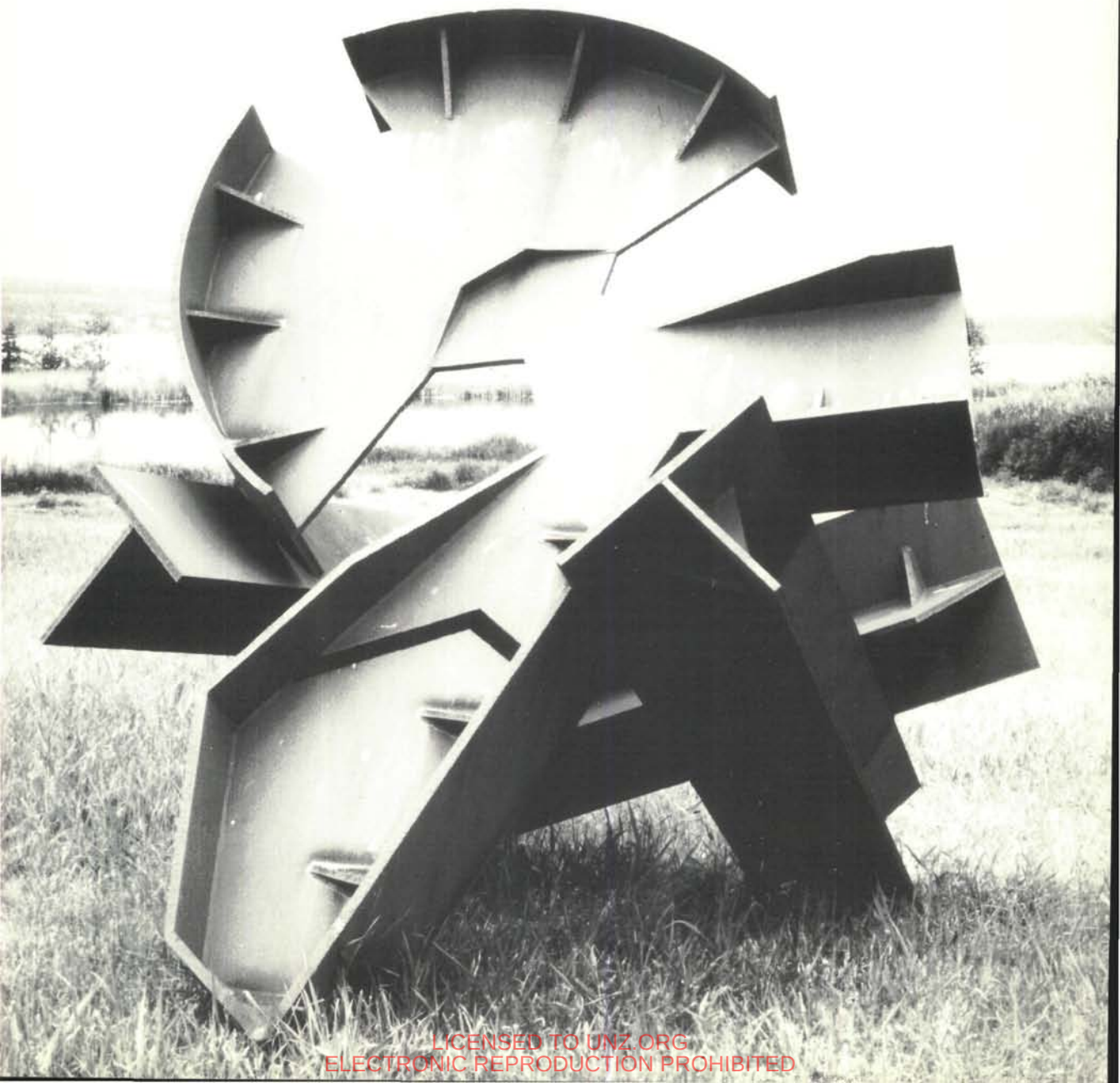

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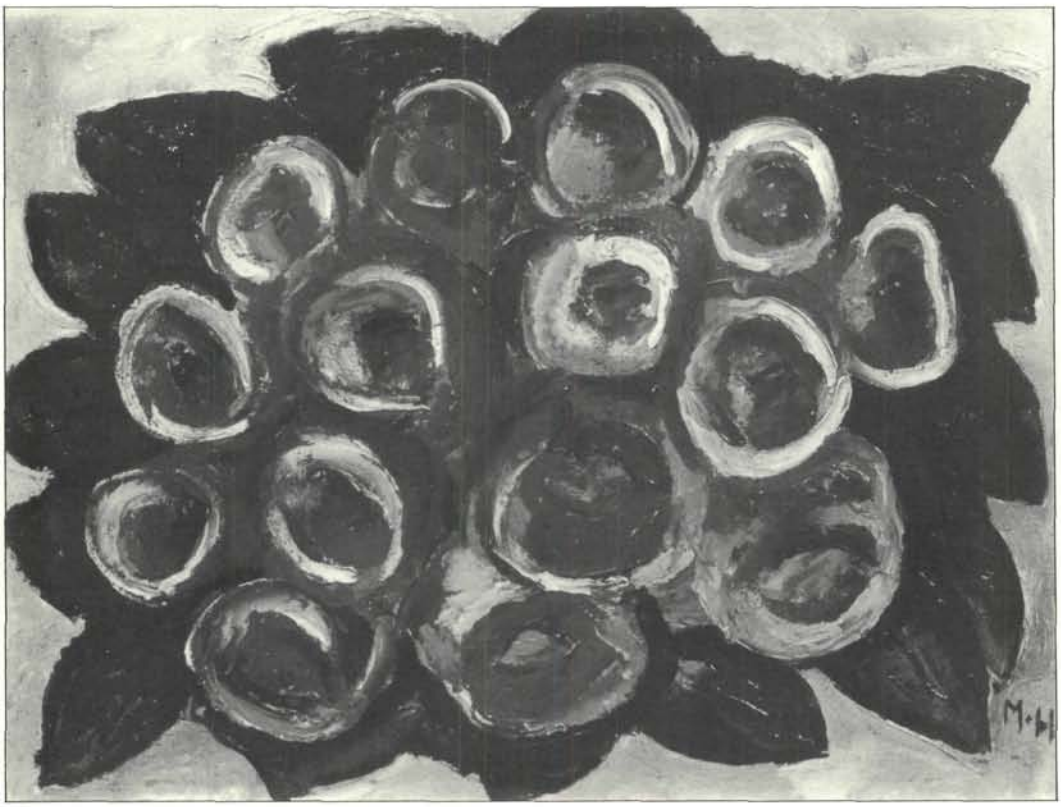

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